County officials exploring designs, visiting other lockups

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Cortland County public safety officials are once again revisiting options for building a public safety complex that would address many of the jail's previously cited inefficiencies.

Legislators Kevin Whitney (R-Cortlandville), Dick Bushnell (D-LD4), Jail Capt. Budd Rigg, Sheriff Capt. Rob Derkson and Director of Budget and Finance Peggy Mousaw visited the St. Lawrence County Correctional Facility on Monday to explore the modern designs that could be incorporated into a proposed public safety complex for Cortland County.

Whitney said Tuesday afternoon that his visit to the St. Lawrence County facility went well and he cited different aspects of it that he thinks would benefit Cortland County.

"Everything we talked about with our current situation ... was almost verbatim to what they (St. Lawrence County) were experiencing and why they had to give in to build a new correctional facility," Whitney said.

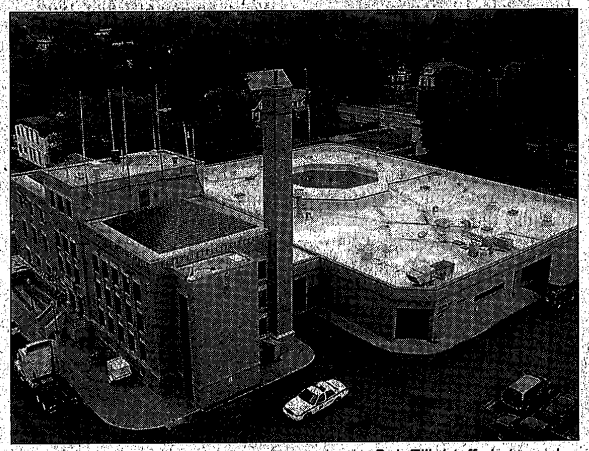
Overcrowding has been a continuing problem at the Cortland County Jail, a situation that is costly to the county yearly as it is faced with having to board out inmates to other facilities.

Rigg has stressed the importance of building a more modern jail for years, citing the efficiency of such a structure as well as the fact it would cut boarding out costs.

The Cortland County jail has a ratio of one correction officer to every 10 to 20 inmates. There are 90 inmates at the jail as of press time. The St. Lawrence County facility has about one correction officer to about every 60 inmates. That facility has a total of 186 inmates.

St. Lawrence County Sheriff Kevin Wells said Wednesday afternoon that staff moved into the new jail in 2010, prompted by an unhealthy and unsafe work environment at the old jail.

The new jail uses a "pod" design in which one officer is assigned to a pod holding about 50 inmates. If an incident occurs, there are corrections officers stationed around the facility for quick response.



Bob Ellis/staff photographer

This overhead photo shows the Cortland County Public Safety Building, left, and the Cortland County jail.

Wells added that one of the most important items to focus on is staff safety, lauding the design for ensuring a good work environment.

Whitney said the facility's design gives officers "visual access" to many parts of the jail.

"I was just astounded they had one corrections officer watching over all those inmates," Whitney said.

One of the other things Whitney and Bushnell remarked on is the cleanliness of the jail, noting the efficient design makes it easier to maintain.

"It's no reflection on what our staff does," Whitney said. "It's how our jail's designed."

Rigg added the same group will visit Chenango County Correctional Facility on Tuesday. Ithaca-based LaBella Associates designed the Chenango County facility and is also one of the companies that bid for Cortland County's project.

Cortland County received bids for the project in August 2014 from both LaBella Associates and from Latham-based SMRT Architects & Engineers, which designed the St. Lawrence County facility.

"We can take bits and pieces from all these facilities and incorporate the best (ones) for Cortland," Rigg said. "We're not going to take some cookie cutter model."

The county jail was built in 1990. Sheriff Lee Price, who is not running for re-election next year, has advocated building a bigger jail due to the increase in the cost of boarding out inmates.

As of May 31, the costs of boarding inmates out this year was $179,850.

The Legislature has hesitated to proceed with any plans because of the cost. It would cost about $3 million just to study, and design the building and about $35 million to actually build the complex. The county would have to bond for this because of high costs.

Whitney said county finance director Mousaw will study the bid numbers to gauge the feasibility of taking on the project. Officials have not released information in the bids because the Legislature has not awarded a bid yet.

Both bids came in around $35 million to $38 million.

"I do realize we need to do something different," Whitney said. "Our jail is deteriorating ... no matter how we look at it."

Mousaw said Wednesday morning she will be looking at the numbers presented in the bids and may be able to assess the project in the next two months.

Wells agreed it is a huge financial commitment to build a new facility but said it would be a good move for the county in the long run.

"All the expenses for these projects, there's no grant money for these types of things," Wells said. "These (projects) are the county's responsibilities."