

# Three months after vote, opposition to West County jail expansion simmers



Sam Richards/Staff

Opponents of a planned expansion of the West County Detention Facility in North Richmond tell the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors how they feel. May 23, 2017

By **SAM RICHARDS** | [srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com](mailto:srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com) | Bay Area News Group

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**MARTINEZ** — Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto went to the podium and started to cry when talking about her poor upbringing, living in a car piled high with dirty clothes “eating government cheese,” and how much she appreciated a social services hand up.

“I’ll never touch cheddar cheese ever again,” said Pardue-Okimoto, now a registered nurse and an El Cerrito city councilwoman, to the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday. “But I’m glad you spent that money on me ... and money on my education.”

The West County Detention Facility in Richmond is seen in an aerial view on Wednesday, Sept., 30, 2015. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group Archives)

But if that exchange was unusual, being from one elected official to five others, Pardue-Okimoto was hammering home a point the supervisors have been hearing again and again, over and over, in recent weeks. The subject: A \$25 million expansion plan for the West County Detention Facility in North Richmond that the supervisors approved in February. The ongoing message: Reverse that approval, and pay for other community services instead of more jail space.

“I think people are holding out hope their elected officials are listening to them,” said Jovanka Beckles, a Richmond city councilwoman who has addressed the supervisors herself on this subject. “We need to have leadership that listens to the community.”

While that drumbeat gets slowly but steadily louder, is it likely that February pro-expansion decision will be reversed, especially with a \$70 million state grant through Senate Bill 844 for the expansion work almost in hand? According to Board of Supervisors Chairman Federal Glover ... not very.

“The expansion doesn’t mean we are trying to incarcerate more,” said Glover, based in Pittsburg and representing District 5, two days after that tense Martinez supervisors meeting. “We’re trying to ensure a safe landing when they’re released.

“Once everything is in place, I think people will be pleasantly surprised,” Glover added.

Jail-expansion critics remain unconvinced, and say more services in the community would help keep some who otherwise would end up in jail from landing there. And the critics are many; a mid-March survey of more than 600 Contra Costa voters by an Oakland-based law firm shows 48 percent of them oppose expanding the West County jail, compared with 37 percent who support the expansion.

Also, the survey revealed more support for providing mental health services in the community than in the jails — an idea reinforced by several speakers Tuesday.

Alyssa Kang of the California Nurses Association tells the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors why she thinks the West County jail expansion should be scotched in favor of more community programs. May 23, 2017 Sam Richards/Staff  
The Board of Supervisors voted 4-1 in February to approve the jail expansion at North Richmond. It would include a high-security wing to allow moving up to 400 inmates from the drastically overcrowded Martinez Detention Facility, and enable more mental health treatment for high-security offenders.

The dissenting vote was John Gioia of Richmond, who has maintained it is more economical to dispense community services from outside jail walls than from within them.

Mental health treatment was a chief concern among the estimated 60 to 70 people who on Tuesday filled much of the supervisors’ chambers. Many of the 26 people who spoke were from West County, but others came from Martinez, San Ramon, Walnut Creek, Oakley and other cities.

Most decried building more jail space instead of using that money to provide services — mental health treatment was most often mentioned — that help keep people out of jail. Also criticized was the county Sheriff’s Office’s \$6-million-a-year contract with the

federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement to temporarily house ICE detainees from the area awaiting possible deportation.

“The jail shouldn’t be a profit center for our county,” said the Rev. Leslie Takahashi of Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek. Another speaker told the supervisors the ICE contract was tantamount to the county supporting “Trump’s agenda.”

Richmond City Councilman Melvin Willis told the supervisors that choosing a jail expansion over providing local services is “telling my community that you’re expecting them to fail and be locked up, and that’s wrong.”

Beckles said legal action to stop the jail expansion is being considered by the city of Richmond, and could center on whether that ICE contract might somehow disqualify Contra Costa County from receiving that \$70 million grant from the state Board of State and Community Corrections.

Glover said the county must add jail capacity in any event, given the overcrowding, “and we’re fortunate that we can do it with state dollars.”

Gioia countered that some of that SB 844 state jail-expansion funding could be reallocated from jail construction to mental health treatment facilities, under a recent proposal by state Sen. Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley. The need for jail expansion could be diminished, Gioia added, if the county lets that ICE contract lapse — an action he supports.

Though he said another supervisors’ vote on the expansion is highly unlikely, there will be a vote this summer to formally accept the grant money, and to approve the county’s funding match for the project. Three “no” votes there could hold up the project, Gioia said; “I’m not in the business of making predictions” about getting at least two board colleagues to vote with him on that, he said.

Nancy Ybarra, a community organizer from Richmond, told the supervisors she sees the need for services every day on the West County streets. “The misery, the lack of resources, the lack of help. ... And you wonder why we’re going crazy in the first place?”