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May 23

Board of Corrections to hear public opinion on Franklin County Jail status

Hearing set for June 12 at UMF

By Kaitlin Schroeder kschroeder@centralmaine.com
 Staff Writer

FARMINGTON — Franklin County residents will have a chance to express their opinions to the state Board of Corrections in June at a public hearing about the county jail's pending status upgrade.

Board members will take questions and comments at the 4 p.m. Wednesday, June 12, hearing in the Olsen Student Center at the University of Maine at Farmington

Sheriff Scott Nichols said he feels more positive every day about the possibility of the board returning the Franklin County Jail to a fully operational facility. It currently is allowed to hold prisoners only 72 hours.

"I don't want to count my chickens before they hatch, but this is an awful lot to go through if they had no intention of letting us have our jail back," he said.

He said the lack of bed space in the jails across Maine, along with losing Somerset County as a cooperating jail, could motivate the board to reinstate the jail to gain bed space in the system.

Franklin County Jail officials met last week with the corrections working group to continue discussing the status change, Nichols said.

When the working group recommended in March that the jail be allowed to operate fully starting July 1, its recommendation was contingent on Jail Administrator Doug Blauvelt's report that he could operate the jail in the coming fiscal year for \$1.59 million, which is under the \$1,621,201 tax cap set by the 2008 jail consolidation law.

Board members had expressed concern that Franklin County officials would be unable to operate their jail under the capped amount they are allowed to raise by taxes.

As a 72-hour holding facility, the jail has been operating at about \$1.1 million per year. The county raises the capped amount each year through taxes and the extra \$500,000 is dispersed by the state to other jails, mainly Somerset County, for holding any prisoners that need to be held past the 72-hour limit.

Franklin County officials have maintained that transporting prisoners to out-of-county jails is a waste of their time and money. Local defense attorneys have also said housing inmates in other counties possibly violates equal protection rights.

According to state regulations, in order to make the switch, the county also will need to provide public notice for all stakeholders, or people who would be affected by the switch, and give them 20 days to respond to the announcement in writing so their concerns would be on the board's record.

The board also would need to hold at least one public hearing to allow residents to ask questions and make comments. The board would need to make a formal decision on the recommendation within 90 days of the public hearing.

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