

Fresno City Council invests in five beds at county jail

By George Hostetter
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Fresno's pilot project of leasing beds in the Fresno County Jail is acquiring some permanence.

City officials are cheering the option while ruing its necessity.

The City Council has approved a deal that guarantees five beds at the downtown jail will be under the Police Department's control.

City Hall and the county signed a similar contract in 2013. That two-year agreement was deemed a test.

An alleged bad guy who might be released early from jail because of overcrowding would be kept behind bars on the city's say-so. The goal was to put a big dent in car thefts and burglaries.

The test got a passing grade. The new agreement is for five years.

What we're paying for is the security of our city.

Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer

"I was hopeful that at some point we would no longer need these beds," Chief Jerry Dyer told the council last week. "But the reality is that the only way we can truly control auto thefts and some of the property crimes in our city is to be able to designate who stays in jail.

"Absent this agreement, I don't have the ability to do that."

Sheriff Margaret Mims likes the agreement.

City officials "know which individuals are causing them the most work," Mims said. "This is the best for everybody."

The deal passed without opposition, but Council Member Esmeralda Soria did ask tough questions about cost and the contract's length.

The deal is simple:

- The city pays \$520 per day (\$104 per bed), even if a bed occasionally goes empty.
- The daily cost is locked in for the full five years.
- The city can get out of the deal at the end of a fiscal year simply by declining to appropriate money for the beds in the next fiscal year's budget.
- Dyer and his team decide which alleged criminals in Mims' custody sleep in those beds.

It's everything else that is complicated.

Take, for example, Soria's concern about cost.

"I want to make sure we're not paying twice for the bed space, that we're maximizing our taxpayer money," she told Dyer.

Soria's point: Fresno along with other county taxpayers already pay for a functioning jail. Why spend precious general fund dollars for what appears to be the repurchase of five of those beds?

"We are paying twice," Dyer told Soria. He added that the city has no choice if public safety is a primary concern.

Dyer on Friday refined his views. Fresno, he said, actually are making two separate purchases.

The first purchase is when Fresno with their taxes help fund jail operations. But that doesn't buy authority to say which bad guys stay in an often overcrowded jail, and which go through a revolving door and back onto the streets. Such authority belongs to the sheriff.

Fresno can be content with only this purchase and hope for the best, Dyer said.

The second purchase puts some of that stay-or-release authority in the city's hands.

Dyer compared the concept to the retail world where consumers choose between basic services and extra services.

"We've got a criminal justice system that I'm not satisfied with," Dyer said. "Therefore, we're willing to take additional tax dollars and buy additional services."

Soria on Thursday said she has been following the jail-bed debate for several years. She told Dyer she will be keeping a sharp eye on the program's progress.

\$189,800

Cost per year to Fresno for the five jail beds

Which raises another head-scratcher: Is Fresno's jail-bed experiment, no matter how successful, destined to become permanent?

Before the bed deal, Fresno was suffering through 23 auto thefts per day on average, Dyer said. That number has dropped to below eight per day in 2015. At this pace, Dyer said, the department will hit its goal of reducing auto thefts for a full year below the 3,000 mark.

Dyer in his Friday interview told the story of two men, both in their 20s, to explain the tie between jail beds and crime.

Both were prolific car thieves, averaging one to two stolen cars per day. Drug habits played a role. The two were arrested, then released. They returned to their old routines. They were arrested again and put in city-controlled beds. They stayed in jail until the wheels of justice were finished with them. They were recently sentenced to three years behind bars.

"That's the purpose of the beds," Dyer said.

At that rate, Fresno might seem likely to run out of hyperactive car thieves and burglars within five years.

Dyer won't go that far. The state's prison realignment, a fancy term for essentially sending particularly nasty criminals to county jails, remains a force in local affairs. Proposition 47, with its reclassification of so-called nonserious crimes, has caused about a 40% cut in daily felony arrests by Fresno police officers, but apparently done little to curtail the drug problems that spur so many property crimes.

The way Dyer talks, those five jail beds and City Hall are headed for a long marriage.

"We keep the beds full," Dyer said. "Unfortunately, that's because we have so many prolific thieves."

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