

Chester County approves paying for jail renovations with 1-cent sales tax

By Charles D. Perry · The Herald

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The future of Chester

County's dilapidated jail shifted from bleak to promising Tuesday. But all of the facility's problems aren't solved yet.

Voters approved a penny sales tax increase to pay for renovating the jail, said Bill Marion, chairman of the county election commission.

The nearly 35-year-old facility has failed state inspections for 17 consecutive years and will be shut down by the state in August 2009 if it's not brought up to code.

Had voters not approved the tax hike, leaders said the cost of the jail improvements would likely have been passed on in the form of an 18 percent property tax increase.

"I'm just glad my property taxes ain't going to be going up," said Sheriff-elect Richard Smith, who will soon take over the post. "I'm like everybody else."

Smith said he hates that the county needs a penny sales tax, "but it's a necessary evil."

The estimated cost of the upgrades is \$11 million. The tax will last for seven years and is expected to generate nearly \$13 million. The extra money will be used for related expenses.

Proponents say the tax spreads out the burden of paying for the project rather than placing the load on local landowners.

The sales tax applies to anyone who makes a purchase in Chester County, whereas a property tax hike would only affect local landowners.

Had voters rejected the tax, county taxpayers would have been forced to bear the cost of shipping and housing inmates at other counties' jails. The estimated cost of housing would be about \$1.7 million a year.

The county would have to spend another \$500,000 annually to hire more employees and pay for additional vehicles to transport the inmates.

The county's three municipalities with police departments — Chester, Great Falls and Fort Lawn, all of which use the county jail — would have to make their own arrangements for transporting inmates, and the cost would be passed on to local landowners.

"It'd be a nightmare," Smith said.

With the state's deadline looming, Smith hopes that if the county completes at least some of the renovations, state officials will grant an extension.

"We still ain't out of the woods yet," he said. "We've got to have something done by August."