

Four counties apply to build youth detention facilities

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Four counties have submitted applications to build detention facilities for less-serious juvenile offenders.

The grant applications were due by noon Monday, and Brown, Dane, Milwaukee and Racine Counties applied.

Under a bill Gov. Tony Evers signed Friday delaying the closure of Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake in northern Wisconsin by six months, there is a three-month extension for the Juvenile Corrections Grant Committee to consider applications to build county-run youth lockups that will help replace the current system.

Legislation approved last year mandated the youth prisons be shuttered by Jan. 1, 2021. Serious juvenile offenders from those youth lockups would be placed in one of two so-called "Type 1" facilities run by the state, while less serious offenders would be sent to county-run Secure Residential Care Centers for Children and Youth, or SRCCCYs. The act also called for the expansion of the Department of Health Services' Mendota Juvenile Treatment Center.

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But the counties interested in applying for grants to building SRCCCYs raised concerns with the measure, ranging from funding levels to technical language in the law they felt needed to be clarified before they could move forward to apply for funding.

Under last year's law, the county grant applications were due at noon Monday and had to be passed on to the Joint Finance Committee by midnight.

That would have left the grant committee roughly 12 hours to review all the

information and make decisions on which applications to approve.

The committee now has until Oct. 1 to review the applications.

The costs for the proposals submitted Monday range between Dane County's \$3.5 million bid on the low end to Milwaukee County's \$41.8 million project.

But Mary Jo Meyers, director of the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Human Services, told WisPolitics.com her county's budget could become more flexible in the coming months. She said that Milwaukee County's bid was based on a "ballparking" of the percentage of youth currently at Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake who would be housed in Milwaukee rather than on building costs.

Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele indicated that due to the rushed nature of the grant application process, the county didn't have the requisite time to contract with architects or come to agreements with providers.

"We wanted to make sure that we, you know, had a safe number," he told WisPolitics.com in the same interview.

Meyers added that a prior estimate on refurbishing the Vel R. Phillips Youth Detention Center, a key feature to the county's SRCCCY bid, had carried an estimated price tag around \$5 million. That figure would be in line with the bid submitted by Dane County, which is also looking to remodel an existing structure.

Quizzed by WisPolitics.com on why their overall bid was more than 10 times the cost of its counterpart in Dane County, Meyers highlighted that a significant chunk of the current Lincoln Hills population comes from Milwaukee County.

Meyers also noted the Vel Phillips Center was only one piece of the grant application, which also included remodels of two or more existing community-based buildings. Those structures, Meyers said, carried a far greater cost variability.

"Our facilities manager has been very cautious in saying, 'Look, you really can't tell until you know which facility, how old the facility is, what it would take to secure the perimeter because every facility is different in terms of like how the road goes into the facility, how the building sits on the land,'" she said. "We wish we knew (what costs would be) because it was tough to trying to do it without."

While Act 8 alleviated concerns about applications deadlines and JFC addressed

some funding issues, several counties told WisPolitics.com they are still worried the undertaking wasn't addressing what they consider to be needed policy and cultural shifts.

To address those, the grant committee was also tasked with developing a Wisconsin model of juvenile justice focused on creating programming that prepares youth for life after incarceration.

Much like the application process though, development of the model also is running behind schedule. The grant committee has spent a significant amount of time working on it, but all it has to show for its efforts at this point is a document encompassing considerations for what the model should look like.

County officials told WisPolitics.com that they fear the committee is ignoring that document as lawmakers charge ahead in an effort to meet the self-imposed deadline. Take, for instance, the proposed goal to serve youth "in smaller, regional facilities that are closer to their communities and foster engagement with their families to promote a successful transition home."

That seems to be at odds with Act 185 author Rep. Michael Schraa's assertion that the committee was looking to move ahead with proposals to build SRCCCYs in Milwaukee, Racine and Dane counties. Schraa told WisPolitics.com several times over the course of the last month that the grant committee was locked on to putting SRCCCYs in three counties located in that region of the state.

Erik Pritzl, the Health and Human Services executive director for Brown County who has been a key figure in developing the region's SRCCCY bid, blasted that statement.

"When I go back to those early discussions, the idea was let's change how we do youth justice services," he told WisPolitics.com earlier this month. "It's not just about Lincoln Hills and Copper Lake being under scrutiny; it was about where the facilities are located, the benefits of keeping youth closer to home, changing the model of service.

"I don't think we're seeing that play out now."

Schraa, R-Oshkosh, countered that concentrating on the southern and southeastern part of the state made sense because a vast majority of juvenile corrections

placements come from that region.

An April report from the DOC on youth in Corrections custody largely backs up Schraa. The most recent average daily population demographic shows that nearly 57 percent of juvenile offenders come from Milwaukee County while no other county reached double digits.

The numbers show Dane and Racine counties have the second and third largest populations of youth in DOC custody over the last five years. But that data also shows that Brown County's population is ticking up year after year and overtook Dane and Racine in 2018 as the county with the second largest population.

While the proposed Type 1 facility in Hortonia would serve serious juvenile offenders from the area, Pritzl questioned what happens to young people who would be sent to SRCCCYs in the southern part of the state under the new system.

"We've created that distance between families and their youth. And that idea of aftercare being successful and reintroducing the youth back to the community is going to be a challenge because they're that much farther away," he said.

Pritzl said if the state moves ahead with southern SRCCCYs, counties in the northern and western regions of the state will likely try to use the new correctional system as little as possible. He said they will instead opt to use the so-called "365-day programming" that some counties already employ as an alternative to juvenile detention.

Schraa conceded in an ideal world, there would be funding for SRCCY facilities outside of Milwaukee, Dane and Racine counties. But he said fiscal reality doesn't always match the ideal world and told WisPolitics.com he hoped to secure funding for another two or three SRCCCYs in the next budget cycle.

"We need one in the northern part of the state, and we need one in the central or western part of the state just so that we don't run into the same problems as we did with Lincoln Hills and having families three, four hours away," he said.

Wisconsin Counties Association Deputy Director of Government Affairs Sarah Diedrick-Kasdorf told WisPolitics.com not to rule out Brown County as the grant committee begins to review applications.

Diedrick-Kasdorf has played a vital role in coordinating the state's juvenile justice

reboot with counties and said she believes that other lawmakers plan to approach the bid process with a more open mind.

“In talking to other members of the grant committee and the Legislature and members of the finance committee as well, we should not presuppose where we think grant dollars will be going and what counties would receive them before we even have received grant applications,” she said. “So you know, for (Schraa) to have said we’re going to fund these three I think was a bit premature.”

She also noted that she had been led to believe the \$80 million figure SRCCCY allocation from the JFC was a “placeholder,” adding that the proposals from Milwaukee and Racine counties may swallow up the entirety of the funding.

“Do we tell Dane no and do we tell Brown no?” she asked. “The Finance Committee will be able to come back and is going to have to take a look at this.”