

BERKS COUNTY PRISON BOARD MINUTES

JANUARY 12, 2022

The Berks County Prison Board met in a regular session on Wednesday, January 12, 2022, at 9:00 A.M. in a Microsoft Teams Meeting.

CALL TO ORDER:

Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt called the meeting to order at 9:00 A.M.

The following members were in attendance:

Commissioner Christian Leinbach
Commissioner Michael Rivera
Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt
District Attorney John Adams
Judge Scott Lash
Secretary Sandra Graffius
Sheriff Eric J. Weaknecht

The following County staff also attended:

Executive Assistant Jessica Blausler
Solicitor Christine Sadler
Deputy Warden-Custody Jeffrey Schearer
Warden Jeffrey Smith
Chief Deputy Warden Stephanie Smith

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A motion was made to approve the December 15, 2021 meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

JAIL SENIOR STAFF REPORTS

INMATE POPULATION: Warden Jeffrey Smith stated the inmate population was 725. There are 2 juveniles being held in Lehigh County. Twenty-four inmates sentenced to SCI. Eighteen are scheduled to leave by January 20, 2022. Three are waiting for a transport date. Three are not ready to be issued a transfer date. Last Friday all counties were notified by the DOC that there would be delays in their reception process. They are experiencing challenges with the surge in Covid 19 cases at their level with staff and inmates. Their plan was to delay the transports to SCI Smithfield. This did not have a significant impact on scheduled transfers.

FACILITIES & MAINTENANCE PROJECTS: Warden Jeffrey Smith updated on the outstanding project.

NVR Project- No new progress. The IS team and Jail staff are still working closely with the security vendor to determine the statement of work.

CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS AT THE JAIL: Due to the increases of COVID cases at the jail. As a result, the following precautions are taking place:

- Restricted inmate movement
- Temporarily suspended friends and family visitation
- Continue with our enhanced screening measures
- Continue with increased cleaning efforts
- Working closely with Adult Probation and the Courts in reviewing the cases in an effort to control population

PROGRAMS: Chief Deputy Warden Stephanie Smith updated the Board regarding Covid. Vaccinees continue to be offered to the inmate population. Inmates can volunteer for the vaccine.

A MOU has been finalized about offering Narcan to eligible inmates being released. The information is being sent over to COCA and should be presented to the commissioners this month. The project should roll out later this month.

STAFFING: Deputy Warden-Custody Jeffrey Schearer updated the Board on the status of the staffing; there were 30 Correctional Officer vacancies. There are 8 candidates in the hiring process. Three are going through a background process and are from the December 7th testing. Five interviews being held tomorrow which are from the January 5th testing. There is a tentative academy start date February 23rd and the next testing date is scheduled for March 2nd.

SOLICITOR'S REPORT

Solicitor Christine Sadler has no items for session and one item for executive session regarding contract negotiations and will require no action.

PRISON BOARD COMMENTS: Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt updated the board that the county is moving forward on the construction of a new corrections facility. Steps were taken with CGL to complete a needs assessment of population trends and criminology trends.

There will be tremendous amount of public information regarding the new corrections facility also programming with what the jail square footage should look like, what should be contained within the walls of a jail, and a financial modeling procurement method. The county is tentatively engaging CGL for those three core functions of work to be approved at next Thursday's Commissioners meeting. The board will continue to keep the Prison Board, the Criminal Justice Advisory Board Steering Committee and the General Membership Committee apprised as the project continues to move forward. This is a four-year project that will have a very small steering committee that will be meeting on Thursdays for about two to three hours. The steering committee's goal is to call people in on a as needed basis. If there are actionable items to be acted on financially for the Board of Commissioners that will then be brought up at the Tuesday budget OPS meeting. If there is a need for the Solicitor, Budget, Purchasing or the criminal justice component to be interviewed or brought in, they will be given sufficient notice and if they're available. They will meet with the steering committee the following Thursday. There is hope that the people appreciate by keeping the steering committee small but tying everybody in as things move forward to make sure everyone is being heard. There will be public meetings out in the community to gauge the opinions and the thoughts with people in the community. The meetings will be held over the next several months with the help of CJL and Stephanie Weaver. This will be the single biggest financial project ever undertaken by the county. The county wants to make sure every taxpayer in the community understands the reason for this, the justification for it, and to have them involved every step of the way. The community needs to be aware of the project so there are no surprises when their tax bill comes out in 2023 and there's an increase. The scope of this project is something that CGL is going to work on. The hope is that it is going to be a 1000 bed facility. And from there other enhancements need to be done and best practices. Commissioner Leinbach stated it is possible to make a final decision on the construction by the end of 2023 beginning of 2024. This is a big decision and necessary. A completed detailed evaluation of whether it made sense to build new or renovate has been conclusive. The idea of renovating a 1933 jail a 1992 jail that has been connected created all kinds of problems. It would be more costly, more time consuming, and security concerns with the moving the population around during that renovation. There was significant time of over a year or more determining if the jail could be salvaged. It was decided there needs to be a long-term solution. The jail needs to be rightsized it needs to address programmatic and programs that help with recidivism in the system. There were also thoughts the time value of money by holding off and waiting until the cost of materials could get better somewhere down the road but that would be at least a 7% increase inflation if not between 7 and 10% each year you delay. There's no interest in privatizing the jail the county would remain with running the jail itself.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Commissioner Barnhardt to adjourn at 9:16 A.M. The next Prison Board meeting will be held on February 9, 2022.

Sandy Graffius

Sandy Graffius, Prison Board Secretary