

500-man prison proposed for Faribault state hospital site

By Sam Newlund
Staff Writer

A fifth major Minnesota prison, housing 500 men, would be established on the grounds of the state hospital in Faribault under a preliminary proposal of the departments of Corrections and Human Services.

Four men's prisons now operate at capacity with 2,712 inmates, and new-Corrections Department figures disclosed Wednesday show that prison populations are rising at an unprecedented rate.

With a spate of get-tough-on-crime bills in the Legislature, officials expect an even greater crisis in prison capacity the next few years unless new space is created — and soon.

Corrections Commissioner Orville Bung said Wednesday that the increase might even force the depart-

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merit to propose using other state hospitals to house inmates.

The current plan developed by corrections officials, and endorsed by Human Services Commissioner Sandra Gardebring, would convert nine of several dozen buildings at Faribault Regional Center into a medium-security prison. Except for one minimum-security building, it would be surrounded by a 12-foot dual chain-link fence and barbed wire.

The plan appears to have considerable support in the Legislature.

The buildings at Faribault would become available under the Perpich administration's plan to move most retarded people out of regional centers and into small community group homes. That plan, along with another calling for the removal of far fewer people, is awaiting legislative action. A compromise is expected.

Gardebring said that she "absolutely" supports the creation of a 500-man prison at Faribault but that more time is needed for the nine buildings to be vacated. Under the proposal, the Corrections Department would assume total operation of prison space by mid-1991.

"My department and I are very anxious to try to work out the details," Gardebring said. "There's legislative support from the Faribault delegation, and we are going to work very hard ... to allow them to get in

there quickly."

Sen. Donald Samuelson, chairman of the Health and Human Services Division of the Senate Finance Committee, predicted that the proposal will pass. "If in fact it turns out that we're going to pass all these (get-tough) crime bills, and I guess we will, then we're going to have to have additional bed space," the Brainerd DFLer said.

His counterpart in House Appropriations, Rep. Lee Greenfield, DFL-Minneapolis, said he is "not absolutely sure it will fly, but I think it's very likely to occur, given the sentencing bills that are coming through the House. If we're increasing sentences we've got to put people someplace."

The number of men in state prisons has increased steadily since 1984, but officials were stunned by a new figure released yesterday. It showed an increase of 95 inmates in the first three months of 1989. If the number holds for the rest of the year, the annual increase would be 380. Increases in the four previous years were 154, 85, 96 and 222.

Even without get-tough legislation, the Corrections Department's budget for the next two years projects a shortage of 150 to 300 beds. Department information officer Dan O'Brien predicted that 300 would be the more accurate figure.

With new laws increasing sentences for serious crimes, including sex and drug-related offenses, the department estimates that the shortage would be more than 600 beds by the end of 1991, O'Brien said.

The Faribault plan estimates a start-up cost of \$ 12.3 million, including \$5 million for renovation, and a yearly operating expense of nearly \$12.8 million. But officials said this would be much cheaper than building a new prison from the ground up.

The proposal involves fewer than half the institution's buildings. The rest of the 760-acre campus apparently would be available for continued use by retarded residents and for other purposes.

Men now are housed in maximum-security prisons at Stillwater, Oak Park Heights and St. Cloud, and in a medium-security prison at Lino Lakes. Others are housed in less-security facilities at Red Wing and at Willow River, which has a branch on the state hospital grounds at Moose Lake.

Of the seven state hospitals that may lose most or all of their retarded residents under the Human Services plan, Faribault is considered the most suitable for a prison. Faribault Regional Center, the second-oldest state hospital, was established in 1881. Of the eight hospitals, it and the one at Cambridge are the two that house only the retarded. Plans call for a major portion of the Cambridge hospital to be converted into a community college.

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