

Officials grapple with restoring funding to make jails more ‘viable’

Written by By Chrissy Largo Sun Correspondent
Friday, 23 October 2015 09:39



0 Gallup City Council and the McKinley County Commission met in a joint work session to discuss strategies to obtain more funding from the state for housing inmates in the McKinley County Adult Detention Center Oct. 20.

According to the McKinley Legislative Priorities report submitted to city and county officials by County Manager Bill Lee, the county was originally granted about \$5 million dollars, under the County Detention Facility Reimbursement Act in 2007, to cover the cost of housing offenders. But funds were reduced to approximately \$2.96 million for fiscal year 2016, when compared to the \$3.3 million budget in fiscal year 2015.

“The act says that \$5 million should be placed into the budget in order to reimburse the counties,” Lee said. “What we are asking is that this fund be fully restored so that they can help make our jails, throughout the state, not just here in McKinley County, more viable.”

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Lee mentioned that looking at what it has cost the city and the county last year to house prisoners, reimbursement to the County was over \$250,000 in this last fiscal year and this amount can help offset costs so that county money can be used for other programs.

The Act states that \$5 million should be placed into the budget in order to reimburse the counties. However, there may be some division within the Act that allows for the decrease in funding but those costs continue to rise.

The county has the duty to run the jails, and take care of the folks that are incarcerated and still have the directive and the duty to house those people.

“In looking at what it has cost the city and the county this last year, because we try to keep an accurate a figure as we can on those prisoners that would be reimbursed to us here, we know that it was well over \$250,000 in this last fiscal year,” Lee said. “We are running a budget that is one million dollars in the red, and \$250,000 can go help offset those costs a lot and by law these are state prisoners and fall under the state to pay.”

As for the consequences, the taxpayers are mandated to take care of prisoners in the county. Last year, they had more than a \$1 million shortfall. That \$250,000 could have been offset if the state would have paid their share.

Bottom line: the money is not going where it needs to go.

Pulling money out of general funds impacts taxpayers and the \$250,000 could have been used for another program.

Mayor Jackie McKinney added that it is hard for our local judicial system and law enforcement to uphold the laws of the state and to incarcerate prisoners if the state is not paying their share.

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“I think that this has been a real crucial blow to our budget in our county,” County Commissioner Genevieve Jackson said. “I understand that other counties are facing the same hardships. In one county, the people that are incarcerated have to buy their own toilet paper and that is how bad it is now. This is a crucial area that needs to be addressed.”

The reasons behind the budget cut were not clear.

Lee said if there is reason behind why the funding has been cut, he would be open to listening to those reasons, to try to find a meeting ground to find a resolution to get this funding restored.

“What we know is that the number of state prisoners in our care does not decrease,” he said. “We still have roughly the same numbers of folks coming through, not only in McKinley County Jails but jails across the state that this impacts.”

According to the McKinley County’s Legislative Priorities report, under the County Detention Facility Reimbursement Act, it “specifies reimbursement by the State to the Counties for three specific categories of offenders in county jails: 1) parole violators; 2) inmates sentenced to prison and awaiting transport; and 3) offenders under supervision for both probation and parole violations.”

City Manager, Mary Ann Ustick said she fully supports the county’s efforts for state funding.

“The jail is a critical service for the entire community,” she said.