

BURTON CREEK (TAHOE) SHERIFF'S SUBSTATION, COURT FACILITIES, AND JAIL INSPECTION

Summary

Twice in 1999, the Grand Jury visited the County's Burton Creek facility, a short distance east of Tahoe City. This two-story wood-frame building, constructed in 1959, houses the area's Sheriff's Substation, Jail, Court facilities, the Court Clerk's Office, and the Deputy District Attorney's Office.

Although made of wood, the building lacks a sprinkler system and even a good smoke and fire alarm system. A fire could spread undetected through the open attic with devastating results. This unreasonably endangers the public, which is often present in the courtroom and various other areas of the building. Also threatened are prisoners that may be locked overnight in the ground floor jail. Personnel in the second story communications room have a choice of two stairwells as fire exits, but the closest one is too steep and narrow to be considered safe.

Other safety issues are also a concern. The jail booking area is cramped, placing prisoners and jail office personnel in dangerous proximity. Because of the downstairs building configuration, prisoners must be escorted to the courtroom via the public entrance, passing within an arm's distance of witnesses and victims.

In addition to safety issues, the Burton Creek facility is simply too small and inefficient. The building lacks space for adequate fireproof storage of records and evidence. Some storage needs are met through leased cargo containers located throughout the parking lot. The County's lease expenditures for these containers now exceed their purchase price.

The last five Placer County Grand Juries have criticized the dangerous conditions, and the Fire Marshals have regularly agreed with the findings. The Grand Juries have concluded that the Burton Creek facility must be replaced as soon as possible. The County believes replacement need not happen any earlier than 2006 and perhaps not until 2011. In the meantime, the County has agreed to extend a fire and smoke alarm system throughout the building by September 2000, and add a sprinkler system to the jail area by next year. The County also intends to build a separate corridor connecting the jail and the courtroom to provide separation between prisoners and the public.

The 1999-2000 Grand Jury commends the County for these interim steps, but believes nothing short of complete replacement can provide the level of safety and efficiency required of public buildings.

Discussion

Ten years ago, the County approved and funded the replacement of the County's Burton Creek facility, just east of Tahoe City, but that replacement never happened.

The 1999-2000 Grand Jury twice inspected the facility. Personnel were interviewed, including the Placer County Sheriff, the Placer County Executive Officer, the Burton Creek Sheriff's Department Division Commander, several Sheriff's deputies, court personnel, the Deputy District Attorney at Tahoe City, and the North Tahoe District Fire Marshall.

In his most recent evaluation, the Fire Marshal reported that "as in previous years, ...this facility does not meet current standards for fire protection. Specifically, 1) No automatic fire sprinkler system, 2) Automatic fire detection system only a partial system and does not cover the majority of the building, 3) Insufficient occupancy separation between the jail and the rest of the building.... I fear that should a fire occur after hours in an unoccupied section of the building, the fire would spread rapidly through the old construction and open attic. A fire of this nature would pose a threat to the inmates due to the lack of adequate protection systems. If the building is not going to be replaced, then I recommend the building be retrofit [sic] with a total fire alarm and sprinkler system." (See Exhibit 1)

This Grand Jury agrees with past Grand Juries and the Fire Marshall that the building is dangerous and outmoded, and needs to be replaced. Of particular concern is the safety of the Sheriff's personnel on duty in the communications area of the second floor. Although there are two stairways for exiting the second floor, the one nearest these personnel is very narrow and steep. The County accepts that the communications antenna attached to the outside wall of the facility does not constitute an emergency exit. ***Should a fire start and not be immediately discovered and controlled, it would pose a life threatening situation to jail inmates as well as Sheriff's personnel who are on duty 24-hours a day.*** The County reports that it would cost \$10,000 to add an exterior fire escape to the communications room. That is an insignificant amount compared with the safety of the staff.

There are additional safety concerns in this building. Inmates, for instance, must be brought to court using the same entrance as the general public, passing within reach of victims and other witnesses. This is a security risk for everyone. The jail booking area is also a problem, as it is very small, making it unsafe for personnel and prisoners alike. (The Grand Jury has included a diagram in Exhibit 2 indicating one way of improving this configuration.)

There are also major efficiency concerns with this old facility. For instance, Burton Creek lacks adequate fireproof storage space for records and evidence. Short-term needs are met by leasing cargo containers for \$1,000 each per year. These containers have been in use for several years, and lease payments have far exceeded the purchase price of \$2,000 each. Realistically, it will be several years before Burton Creek can be replaced. The Sheriff's Department should purchase the existing containers and lease additional containers until the facility can be replaced.

The County acknowledges the building's shortcomings, but does not intend to replace it before 2006, or perhaps as late as 2011. In the meantime, the County plans to extend a fire and smoke alarm system throughout the building by September 2000, and to add a sprinkler system to the jail area by next year. The County has agreed to build a separate corridor connecting the jail and the courtroom to provide some separation between prisoners and the public.

The Grand Jury commends the County for these steps, but believes it would be more economical in the long run to simply replace the building. Anything short of complete replacement will not provide an adequate margin of safety, or the space and efficiency needed now and in the years ahead. The Grand Jury urges the county to replace the building within the next three years.

Finding 1

The Burton Creek facility is unsafe and inadequate. The County agrees it should be replaced, but expects this to happen no earlier than 2006 and possibly as late as 2011. The Grand Jury finds this schedule unacceptable.

Recommendation 1

The Board of Supervisors should commit to replacing the facility within the next three years.

(Note: the following recommendations require implementation if the facility will not be replaced in the next three years.)

Finding 2

The present building, although two story and wood frame, is without a sprinkler system and an adequate fire alarm system. The County has said it will install an alarm system by September 2000 and a sprinkler system in the jail area during the 2001 construction season.

Recommendation 2

Install these safety systems throughout the structure. Ensure there are smoke and fire detectors in the attic area to reduce the chance of a fire flashing unnoticed from one end of the building to the other.

Finding 3

The employees that work in the second story have a choice of two stairways in an emergency. One of these is quite narrow and steep. This is not a safe or quick method to exit in an emergency. The County has stated that an outside fire escape can be constructed for about \$10,000.

Recommendation 3

Add a second story fire escape. Using the County's replacement date for the building of 2006 to 2011, this would cost only \$1,000-\$1,600 a year on average, and greatly increase the margin of safety.

Finding 4

Inmates are brought through the public entrance of the Courtroom in close proximity to staff and the public, posing a safety hazard for everyone. The County has indicated a new corridor will be built during the 2001 construction season.

Recommendation 4

The Grand Jury commends the County for this plan and urges that it be made a firm commitment.

Finding 5

The prisoner booking area needs to be reconfigured for safety of employees and for efficiency.

Recommendation 5

Reconfigure the booking area, perhaps as suggested in Exhibit 2.

Finding 6

There is insufficient fireproof storage space for records.

Recommendation 6

Obtain additional fireproof storage cabinets.

Finding 7

The substation is leasing cargo storage containers at a cost of \$1,000 per year per container. A container costs \$2,000 to purchase outright. Some containers have been leased for more than two years.

Recommendation 7

Buy some storage containers outright. Lease others to meet needs.

Respondents

Placer County Sheriff
Placer County Board of Supervisors
Placer County Executive Officer
Placer County Facility Services Director

RESPONSE REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS TO:

The Honorable Larry D. Gaddis
Presiding Judge, Superior Court
County of Placer
Historic Courthouse
101 Maple Street
Auburn, CA 95603



NORTH TAHOE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

Serving the California Communities on the North and West Shores of Lake Tahoe

California State Fire Marshal
Northern Regional Division
4433 Florin Rd., Suite 400
Sacramento, CA 95823-2034

December 28, 1995

RE: Inspection of Placer County Jail - Tahoe

On December 22, 1995 an inspection of the jail facility in Tahoe City was conducted.

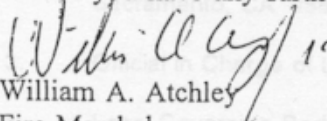
As a result of a fire alarm system being installed in the jail area, and no other major violations being noted, I will approve the building for use as an adult detention facility.

I must point out again as in previous years, that this facility does not meet current standards for fire protection. Specifically, 1) No fire sprinkler system. 2) Insufficient occupancy separation between jail and the rest of the building.

Plans to remodel this building appear to be on terminal hold. I fear that should a fire start in the building and not be discovered and controlled immediately, the fire could pose a life threat to inmates due to the lack of the above fire protection standards.

I feel the issue of a major renovation should be revisited if this building is going to continue to be used as a detention facility.

Should you have any further questions please feel free to contact me at (916) 583-6930.


William A. Atchley
Fire Marshal

5. Presiding Superior Court Judge

6. Grand Jury

3. Official in Charge of the Facility

4. Local Governing Body

5. Presiding Superior Court Judge

6. Grand Jury

EXHIBIT 1



NORTH TAHOE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

Serving the California Communities on the North and West Shores of Lake Tahoe

California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection
Office of the State Fire Marshal
Capital Area Services
P.O. Box 944246
Sacramento, CA 94244-2460

January 24, 2000

RE: Inspection of Placer County Jail, Tahoe City

On December 22, 1999 an inspection of the jail facility in Tahoe City was conducted.

Other than lack of adequate automatic fire protection systems, only minor violations were noted.

It should be noted, as in previous years, that this facility does not meet current standards for fire protection. Specifically, 1) No automatic fire sprinkler system, 2) Automatic fire detection system only a partial system and does not cover the majority of the building, 3) Insufficient occupancy separation between the jail and the rest of the building.

Plans to remodel or replace this building have consistently been placed on hold. I fear that should a fire occur after hours in an unoccupied section of the building, the fire would spread rapidly through the old construction and open attic. A fire of this nature would pose a threat to the inmates due to the lack of adequate protection systems.

If the building is not going to be replaced, then I recommend the building be retrofitted with a total fire alarm and sprinkler system.

Should you have any further questions, please call me at (530) 583-6930.

William Atchley
Fire Marshal

cc: Board of Corrections
Placer County Board of Supervisors
Placer County Grand Jury (Special request)

Captain J.K. Hawthorne, PCSO
Placer County Facility Services

PO Box 3879 • 300 North Lake Boulevard • Tahoe City, California 96145
Business: Phone 530-583-6913 / Fax 530-583-6909 • Division of Fire & Life Safety: Phone 530-583-6930 • Emergency 9-1-1

EXHIBIT 2

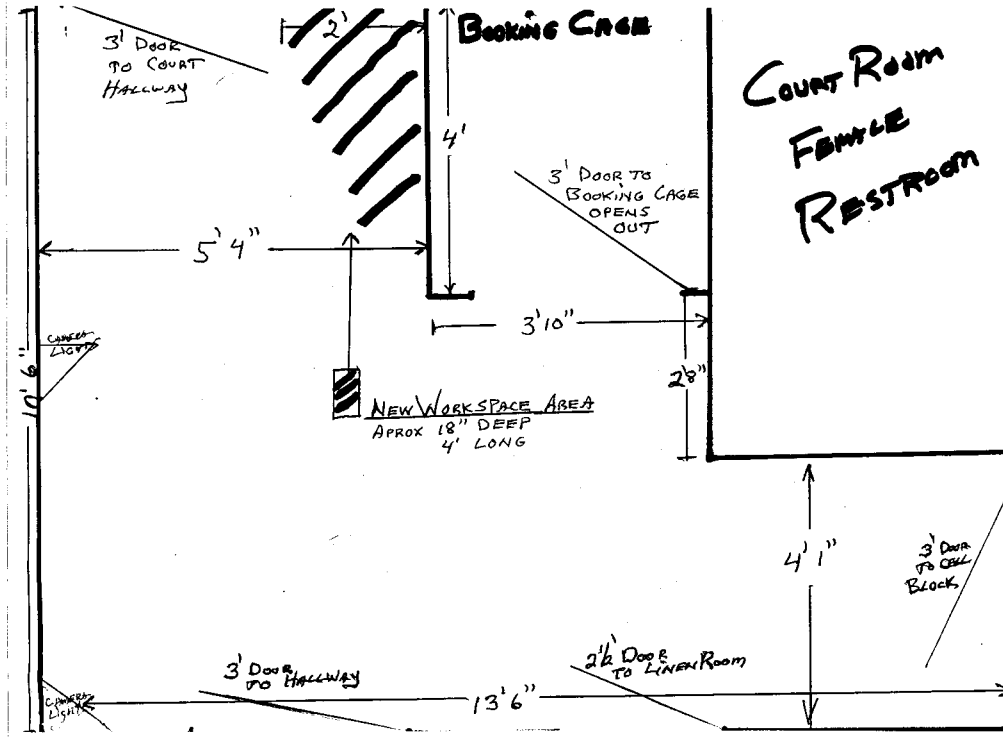


EXHIBIT 3