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Nez Perce County Jail may post 'no vacancy' sign

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By Brad W. Gary of the Tribune

Agreement to house Kootenai County inmates could fill most of the beds



The Nez Perce County Jail in North Lewiston is nearing capacity this week with the arrival of prison... Tribune/Barry Kough

Each of the Nez Perce County Jail's 150 beds could have a person in them in the next few months.

And a recent agreement with Kootenai County could help accomplish the task, locking up more revenue than projected by renting out beds at the \$19.1 million North Lewiston complex that opened last June.

The jail population, the number of people incarcerated at the complex, topped at 121 on Monday. Lt. Jack McGee with the Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office said an additional three or four inmates are expected from Coeur d'Alene this week, joining about 17 presently in custody at the jail.

"We sort of asked them to go slow, because we have to order more uniforms, more mattresses, so we're trying to get some of those supplies in before they hurt us hard," McGee said.

Kootenai County joins the Nez Perce Tribe and the Idaho Department of Juvenile Corrections in paying \$45 per inmate per day to house their prisoners in the jail.

Idaho Department of Correction inmates who have been sentenced but have yet to be transferred into state custody are housed in the jail for \$40 per person per day. A steady level of about 20-25 state inmates has populated the jail over the last several months, McGee said.

About \$143,000 has been collected in jail revenue in the 2010 fiscal year that began Oct. 1, according to Nez Perce County Clerk-Auditor Patty O. Weeks. The county had projected \$100,000 in jail revenue this year, a number set after the jail brought in about \$25,000 from renting to outside inmates in 2009.

The bed rental situation is a switch for the county, which used to be able to house 47 prisoners at its previous jail on the third floor of the Nez Perce County courthouse. Capacity issues at that jail required Nez Perce County to ship its inmates to other nearby jails at a similar cost.

"It's kind of we win twice," McGee said of the new jail's capacity, "not only do we not have to pay to house ours out, we get the money to house others in. I'd say it's a really good deal for us."

An additional 28 specialty beds, used for medical or disciplinary measures, are filled at the jail when needed but are not specifically designed to be rented out. McGee referred to those beds as tools for protecting some prisoners from one another.

Renting out beds will never be a moneymaker for the county, McGee said, but will help offset the costs needed to run the 61,674-square-foot building. Revenue from the beds coupled with billing of prisoners for their stay at the jail, estimated at just under \$10,000 in the present fiscal year, gives the county the ability to recapture some of the building's expenses.

McGee cautions the system is not an exact science, and dips in crime and arrests can send jail population numbers back down. Though with current trends, he believes the jail population could hit capacity as early as this summer.

Gary may be contacted at bgary@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2262.