

ACLU attacks plans to expand N.O. **jail** ; 4,300 beds are needed, sheriff says

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How big a **jail** does New Orleans need?

That's a question advocacy groups want the City Council to consider on Thursday while reviewing Sheriff Marlin Gusman's plans for rebuilding sections of the Orleans Parish **jail** on its current complex.

Plans to increase capacity to at least 4,300 beds would create a **jail** that is far too large for New Orleans' reduced population, said Katie Schwartzmann, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana. The current **size of the jail** -- which holds roughly 3,500 inmates a night -- already ranks it as the largest such facility in the nation, if compared on a per capita basis, she said.

"We are talking about having the largest **jail** in the country and growing that," Schwartzmann said.

The ACLU and other groups have advocated that the entire criminal justice system needs to be reworked, with less emphasis on arresting people for minor offenses and more progressive release policies for people accused of low-level crimes.

In a written statement, Gusman responded that his proposal for a **jail** of 4,300 beds is warranted by the city's criminal justice demographics.

"A safer New Orleans will mean a smaller **jail** in the future, but building a small **jail** under the present circumstances is certainly not warranted," the statement said. Gusman has often pointed out that he alone cannot reshape the system. He notes he is responsible only for housing people arrested by the New Orleans police and not released by a judge.

Michael Cowan, chairman of the New Orleans Crime Coalition, said people involved in the criminal justice system, including Gusman, but involving others, should sit down and come up with

a long-term **jail size** that makes sense.

Gusman's proposal, already approved by the City Planning Commission, is scheduled to be reviewed Thursday by the City Council.

The **jail** in Orleans Parish -- once able to hold as many as 7,500 inmates -- had its capacity drastically reduced by Hurricane Katrina, which damaged several buildings, largely clustered behind the courthouse at Tulane Avenue and South Broad Street. The current **jail** facilities includes buildings refurbished after they were flooded. Under Gusman's plan, which will be financed with federal rebuilding dollars and some bond money under his control, work could soon begin on a new **jail** building to house around 1,400 inmates.

Another large **jail** tower -- designed to house more than 1,800 inmates -- would be completed in a later phase that is not yet scheduled.

Which of the existing **jail** buildings will continue to be operated once the new facilities are completed differs when comparing various documents provided by the sheriff's department. In official documents filed with the City Planning Commission, the final **size of the jail** would be 5,800 beds, with all of the current facilities remaining operational.

But the future proposed bed space is smaller in a chart provided by Gusman's office in response to questions, with only 4,267 beds slated once all the new **jail** buildings are finished.

This is because the severely outdated House of Detention, which Gusman has repeatedly stated he wants to close, would be mothballed. Under this revised plan, a **jail** building that holds federal inmates would be turned into a psychiatric treatment facility and another **jail** building on Tulane Avenue would be converted to offer work release. But the revised bed count does not allocate beds for these refurbished facilities, which presumably would hold some number of inmates.

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