

Calif. sets aside \$270M to upgrade county jails

By Don Thompson, AP

Counties will get another \$270 million for jail construction under the budget approved by California lawmakers this week, even though opponents say the money could be better spent on rehabilitation programs.

The state has provided \$2.2 billion to build jails since 2007, including \$1 billion since California began keeping lower-level offenders in county lockups instead of state prisons in 2011.

Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal for an additional quarter-billion dollars this year was rejected by Assembly and Senate budget committees and the Legislative Analyst's Office, which said the Democratic governor failed to show the need for more construction money.

"There's gonna be an end to the jail construction binge and we ought to look at more cost-effective ways of reducing recidivism and reducing crime," said Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose, who voted to remove the funding.

But it's back in the final budget at the insistence of the governor and county governments that say they need the construction money to update antiquated jails.

The need has grown, they said, since the state began sending more serious, long-term and mentally ill inmates to local jails instead of state prisons.

The competitive grants will be available to 20 of the state's 58 counties that received only partial funding in previous years or never had state help in replacing or renovating

jails.

“The need is clear, that there are counties that have applied for prior rounds and have been unsuccessful or have not applied in the past and still have needs, and this gives them another chance to make the appropriate upgrades that will provide needed space for programming, education, treatment and rehabilitation,” said California State Sheriffs’ Association spokesman Cory Salzillo.

The budget also includes \$20 million earmarked for Napa County’s jail, which was damaged in a 2014 earthquake.

“It’s just really shocking that after both subcommittees rejected the jail construction funds that it would come back in this way,” said Lizzie Buchen, co-coordinator of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, which opposes prison and jail spending.

The budget does include \$67.5 million for grants to counties that prefer not to build new jails and want to offer more mental health and addiction treatment facilities.

“Not every county wants to build jails,” said Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, chairman of the Senate budget committee. “There are some that want to address similar populations in a different way.”

A year ago, the state Senate similarly objected to \$500 million for jail construction money only to see it revived in the final budget agreement.

The legislative analyst earlier this year said the additional money might not be needed in part because of a 2014 ballot initiative that lowered penalties for certain drug and property crimes. The state’s jail population dropped by 10,000 inmates after voters approved Proposition 47.

Salzillo said money is needed if sheriffs are to provide the

sorts of rehabilitation programs that lawmakers and voters envisioned when they approved legal changes in recent years.

The budget also includes another \$28 million on top of nearly \$40 million that Brown previously set aside for mental health and substance abuse treatment, crime victims and school truancy programs under Proposition 47.

The legislative analyst has projected that about \$130 million would be saved in the first year by reducing the prison population through lesser penalties.

“This budget reflects increasing support for smart approaches to safety and justice,” John Bauters, policy director for Proposition 47 proponent Californians for Safety and Justice, said in a statement.

The state budget was approved by the Assembly and Senate. Brown is expected to sign it into law.