

Future of Camden County Jail unwritten

By JANE ROH • *Courier-Post Staff* • June 1, 2010

CAMDEN — Camden County's recent announcement that it might not have to tear down the county jail might have come as a surprise to some of the prison's corrections officers.

Just months ago, the Camden County Corrections union was battling the county over plans to tear down the existing jail and build a new one run by a private contractor.

The officers, all public employees, were told the overcrowded site was far too dangerous to be rehabilitated. Allowing a private firm to assume the operational costs, the county asserted, would save taxpayers millions.

While careful not to jeopardize ongoing contract negotiations, PBA Local 351 members now question whether the county's insistence last year that the jail was unfit was merely a public relations ploy.

County Administrator Ross Angilella said his concern about the jail was with direct lines of sight, an industry term that refers to the ease with which officers and staff can keep watch on prisoners.

"I heard for the first time that there is a possibility, especially now that we've got all this extra room, that maybe they can rectify that," he said.

But corrections officers say the lines of sight in the downtown Camden jail were always good.

"I think some of their statements may have been posturing," said Sgt. Peter Farlow, a PBA 351 spokesman. "I never believed or agreed the facility was unsafe.

"We disagreed with that statement then and we disagree with that statement now. There are cameras everywhere."

The county last summer secured the services of Luminosity, a Florida-based consultancy, after being ordered by a federal judge to reduce the jail's population. Because nonviolent offenders were cycled through the system faster, prisoner numbers

fell from 1,850 last June to about 1,230 this month.

Angilella said recently that if the population trend continues for about a year, the county might have the option of rehabbing the jail.

But in an interview with the *Courier-Post* in December, Angilella and other officials dismissed as inefficient and impractical the option of renovating the structure.

In a public statement, the county said infrastructure repairs would cost \$50 million, and it reiterated that some "design flaws" could not be fixed.

A civil defamation suit filed by the PBA against the board of freeholders still is pending, plaintiff's attorney Stuart Alterman said. At the height of union anger about the privatization plan, Angilella and Freeholder-Director Louis Cappelli, Jr., accused PBA members of vandalizing their property during a Dec. 17 press conference. The county later sent out a press release announcing an investigation of the incident by the prosecutor's office.

The release said the prosecutor's office had "warned county jail personnel" about the alleged crimes. But Jason Laughlin, spokesman for the prosecutor's office, said the office never singled out corrections officers as suspects.

"We never at any point stated we thought it was the corrections officers," Laughlin added, "or had any information that connected the corrections officers."