



## Corrections chief: \$20 million prison is needed

Prison population is exceeding capacity

By Scott Rothschild

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Topeka — Kansas lawmakers reaped the benefits of passing tough-on-crime legislation last year. Now they must pay the bill.

The state inmate population is expected to exceed the system's capacity within two years, officials said Wednesday.

That means lawmakers must plan now for construction of a new prison, officials said.

“There ain't no free lunch,” Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman John Vratil, R-Leawood, said. “If the public wants us to be tough on crime, they need to understand there's a price tag.”

That pricetag could be in the \$20 million range to build a 500-bed medium security cellhouses at the El Dorado state prison.

Currently, there are 8,933 inmates in the state prison system, which has a capacity of 9,397.

But projections from the Kansas Sentencing Commission show that the capacity will be surpassed in 2009.

Much of the increase due to the adoption last year of Jessica's Law, which strengthened penalties against child molesters and other sex offenders.

“This is where we really see the increase in the next 10 years,” said Helen Pedigo, executive director of the Sentencing Commission.

Corrections officials have said the new law would generate the need for 1,000 prison beds by 2016.

“We need to step up to the plate and find new bed space,” said state Sen. Dwayne Umbarger, R-Thayer.

Legislation to contract with a private firm to build an additional prison has been filed, but a similar proposal died last year.

Vratil said there is “dwindling support” in the Kansas Legislature for private prisons because of problems other states have had with them.