G-P hopes to open DWI detention center soon

By MIKE Dunne
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City-parish officials hope to acquire property soon to open a special center for those arrested for driving while intoxicated.

They hope to open it before Jan. 1, when a new law requiring a 48-hour detention goes into effect.

Legislative coordinator Vera Olds said the main stumbling block is acquisition of the site.

She said the city-parish is reviewing appraisals of the property, the old Orleans Building in the 2nd block of Planks Road.

The plan — which calls for a center to book, release, detain and treat DWI offenders — has gotten "good response from a lot of people willing to help," Ms. Olds said.

Backing the concept have been such groups as the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and the Greater Baton Rouge Safety Council.

"We're hoping it will be ready by Jan. 1. If it isn't, it'll be ready shortly thereafter, and that'll be OK," Ms. Olds said.

"We're in a situation where we're on untried ground. No one we know of has tried this anywhere," she said.

The council recently approved shifting $29,000 from a youth offender program at the Eden Park Community Center to a new account to pay for the start-up of a special center to handle drunken drivers.

The new state law — passed by the Legislature last summer — goes into effect Jan. 1 and requires those convicted of DWI to serve two-day mandatory sentences.

Screening staff is putting the finishing touches on the plan by Eden Park Community Center Director Willie Hawkins to open the center.

"We endorse the program ... it has tremendous potential to be a model program," Dr. Harold Brandt, head of MADD, told the council recently.

Nancy Carmel of the Safety Council said that the center is the type of facility needed in East Baton Rouge Parish, where the drinking driver is a problem.

"DWI drivers traditionally figure into 50 percent of the crashes we have," State Police Troop A frequently says that between 60 and 80 percent of the crashes involved DWI," Ms. Carmel said.

"It's a very serious problem in East Baton Rouge and southern Louisiana in general," she said.

"The concept is good, it is practical. It will take all of us working together. ... With crowded jails, something like this is needed," she said, fearing that when jails hit maximum capacity, DWI drivers will be first released.

Although she has not yet had a chance to study the proposal, and the councils will not officially consider the idea until Dec. 14, Ms. Carmel said the concept at least addresses the problem of the drinking driver.

"If the family can't make them [DWI drivers] look at their problem, the law can," she said.

The new state law requires first-time offenders to be jailed at least two days and up to ten days.

"We're proposing a residential facility to assist those people with problems. We're going to have a complete in-house treatment — the whole ball game," Hawkins said.

When first arrested, as Hawkins envisions, the offender will be taken to the DWI center for booking, fingerprinting and release on his own recognizance or bond. Those functions, normally handled at the jail, will be moved to the center.

After the offender is brought to court, given a trial and convicted, the judge will sentence him to the DWI center instead of the parish prison or jail.

Hawkins looked similar programs in California while at the National League of Cities Convention recently and said he came back with several ideas that can make his plan stronger "and a few things we didn't think of."