Jail bond issue vote on Council agenda

By GIBBS ADAMS
and JIM McDonnell
Advocate staff writers

The voters of East Baton Rouge Parish may have to decide soon whether to put up as much as $30 million for new parish prison construction.

Council Administrator-Treasurer Don Nijoka said Wednesday's council agenda will include an item calling for a general obligation bond election Sept. 27 to finance the construction.

The agenda item resulted from a Tuesday morning meeting attended by city-parish officials and U.S. District Judge Frank J. Polozola. Polozola told local officials to get on with construction of an addition to the jail or face the prospect of seeing criminals released.

Mayor Pat Screen said he and others in attendance thought a pay-as-you-go millage that would end when funds are accumulated for the jail would be the best means of financing the improvements.

Nijoka said that whether the city-parish uses one long-term bond issue or a pay-as-you-go millage, a vote of the people will be required. Currently, Nijoka said, city-parish officials have no way of knowing precisely what the construction project will cost or how much the millage will be.

Meanwhile, Nijoka said he would arrange a meeting between the local district judges and a special jail committee consisting of Metro Council members Ben Peabody, Lynda Imes and Pearl George to discuss what can be done to make sure that available jail and prison space is put to the best possible use.

Councilman Kip Holden suggested that as jails become more crowded, officials may have to look at other answers to the problem, such as sentencing offenders to community service or some sort of "house arrest" system.

"A jail is the last thing we want to spend money on," Screen said. "But it's that or putting people on the streets who should be in jail."

Polozola recently told city-parish officials that they must either take some affirmative action toward expanding and improving the quality of their jail facilities or risk having Downtown Jail closed.

Screen said the architectural firm Bradley-Miremont and Sheriff Elmer Litchfield already have discussed the facilities to be included in the new prison.

The mayor said the project likely will be divided into three phases — the first of which will include additional kitchen and dining facilities, laundry, medical and administrative space, as well as a portion of the added housing. More housing would be added in the second and third phases.

Phase 1, since it includes the basic facilities needed to accommodate additional prisoners, would cost $10 million-$15 million. The mayor said one mill of taxation produces $1 million a year, and an 8-to-10-mill special tax probably could be levied later this year.

Screen said the special millage would be the most economical approach.

Nijoka said he is scheduled to discuss the matter with incoming mayor-council aide Bobby Gaston on Wednesday morning.

During the Tuesday meeting, the officials learned that 120 prisoners in Downtown Jail, 361 at Parish Prison and 66 in the women's section at Parish Prison have been determined to be sentenced for offenses of which they are accused.

Among those attending the meeting were Screen; all members of the Metro Council except Councilman Gordon Curry; Litchfield and his attorney, Cyrus Greco; Bill Howe, director of public works; mayor's aide Randy Beach; and council public information officer Dennis McCain.