

Morris not eager to help town on migrants

Officials oppose using jail as holding area

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Morristown has quietly approached Morris County about using the county jail as a holding area for illegal immigrants if local police are deputized as federal immigration agents.

But the initial reaction to the proposal by county officials has been cool.

Freeholder Director Margaret Nordstrom said the town has put out feelers but the county governing board has not gotten a formal request. If it did, the county would most likely decline the offer, she said.

“The freeholders made promises when the new county jail was built that it would not take federal prisoners or outside inmates,” said Nordstrom, referring to the county lockup in Morris Township, at the border of Morristown and Hanover. The jail opened in 2000.

“If we don’t honor the promises of previous freeholder boards, why would anybody believe us in the future?”

The county’s refusal would be “crippling” for Morristown’s effort to get local police deputized as immigration agents, according to Councilman Dick Tighe.

If the county jail will not house federal immigration suspects, Morristown police would need to bring those suspects to a federal detention facility in Elizabeth, Tighe said.

“Our police are stretched already,” he said of the 60-member department, which serves a town of 19,000. “There are things we need them to do in town that at times they’re not able to do. The response times would be affected. It would have a serious effect.”

Mayor Donald Cresitello said he would not comment until the freeholders make a final decision.

“I don’t expect it to be a major problem, but you never know,” he said.

The town’s application to a federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency program that allows local police to start deportation proceedings is under federal review.

Town attorneys met with Morris County Sheriff Edward Rochford and County Administrator John Bonanni late last month, inquiring about the county’s position on use of the jail.

“It’s a policy decision the freeholders would have to make,” Rochford said yesterday. “If the freeholders wanted us to do it, we would take a look at it.”

Rochford said he believes the public supports stricter enforcement of illegal immigration. But he said using the county jail could be a problem.

“Two promises were made to local residents when the county built the new jail: there would be no barbed wire ringing the facility and there would be no federal or outside inmates at the jail,” said Rochford. “So far, we’ve kept those promises.”

Hanover Mayor Ronald Francioli said he sympathizes with Morristown’s plight and believes the federal government needs to address the issue of illegal immigration.

But, he said, housing illegal immigrants at the county lockup “would go beyond the scope of what we agreed to when the jail was built,” Francioli said.

Rochford, who is president of the state Sheriffs Association, spoke to federal immigration officials and queried sheriffs from across the country last month at the National Sheriffs Association convention in Utah. Rochford said other sheriffs were split evenly on the merits of accepting illegal immigrants in their jails.

“Some said you could make quite a bit of money,” said Rochford. “The biggest complaints, however, were that you could face costly lawsuits, people would be picketing outside your jail, civil rights groups were always seeking access to the jail to check on immigrants and it was very time- and labor-intensive for staff.”

If the Morris County Jail were to accept suspects accused of being in the country illegally, the lockup would need to open a currently unused housing ward and hire 12 new officers, Rochford said. The county’s start-up cost would be about \$1 million, and federal officials told him they could not help pay for it, Rochford said.

The jail has a capacity for 525 inmates and currently houses 325.

In the 1990s, freeholder boards declined to accept state money to help finance construction of a new county jail in deals that would have required the jail to accept state prison inmates. In 1996, the U.S.

Marshal’s Office offered \$6 million in return for a 15- to 20-year commitment to house up to 64 federal inmates in the jail.

The freeholders in 1999 also turned down an offer of easy federal money:

\$1.7 million a year for bringing in 64 federal inmates to fill a wing at the new county jail when it opened.

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