

COMMENTARY

Riverside Supervisors Change Course on County Jail

Chris Clarke | April 13, 2011



No jail here for now | Photo: kcadsTM/Flickr/Creative Commons License

A dramatic landscape greets you on Interstate 10 as you enter the low desert via San Geronio Pass: steep mountain ranges to the left and right, gigantic wind turbines like something out of an H.G. Wells novel, and the consistent high winds that make the turbines spin and inflicts sudden lane changes on semi drivers.

On Monday, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to set aside plans to add yet another imposing feature to the landscape: a 7,200-bed county jail.

The 5-0 vote to table the Riverside County Regional Detention Center – generally referred to in the Coachella Valley as the Whitewater Jail – was a reversal of course by the Board of Supervisors, who had endorsed the proposed jail as recently as March 22 of this year.

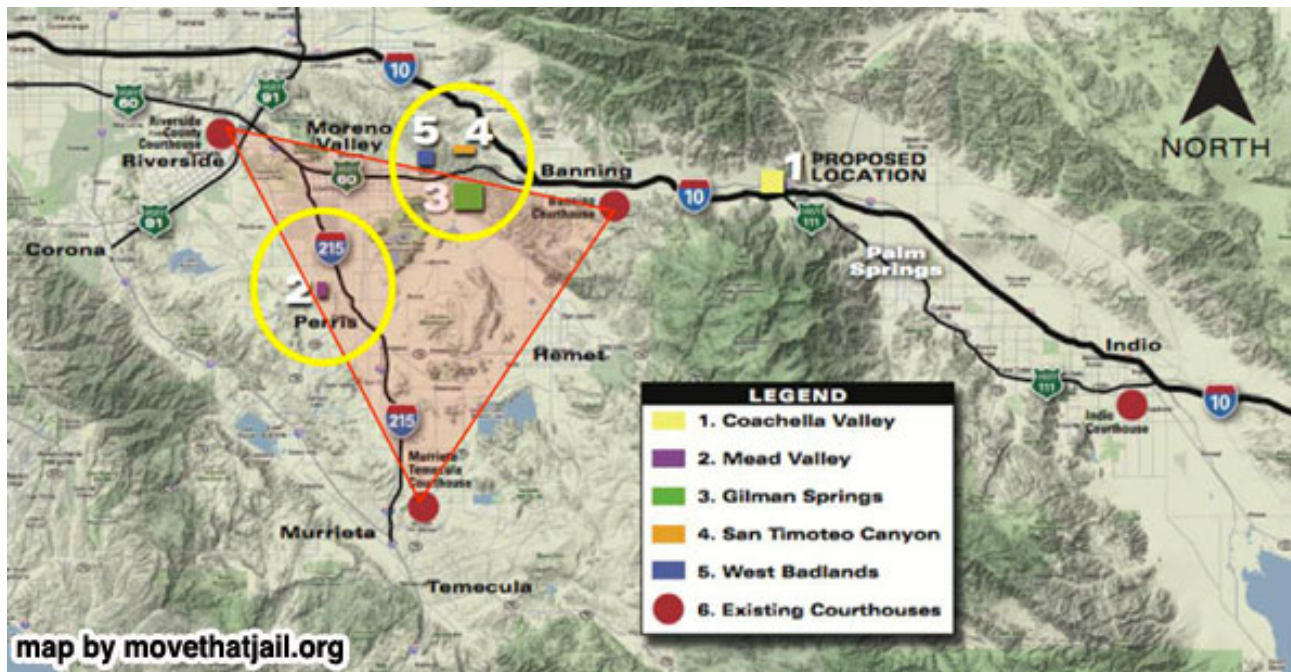
But growing public concern about the jail's effect on tourism and the environment – and second thoughts about the estimated \$300 million price tag for the first phase of construction – prompted Supervisors John Benoit and Marion Ashley to announce last week that they would be tabling the proposal. On Tuesday the other three supervisors agreed, voting to begin the process of scrapping the RDC. A hearing on the matter is scheduled for May 3, after which the Board will make a final decision.

Benoit told the press last week that the new jail was a "financial impossibility." "We've got a \$300 million mountain to climb before we can get to the first bed," he told the *Riverside Press-Enterprise* on April 6.

The new jail was intended to alleviate overcrowding in Riverside County's correctional facilities. Riverside is one of the more incarceration-prone of the 58 counties in the prison-friendly state of California. Out of an adult population of about 1.3 million, the county held more than 11,000 of those adults in custody in December 2009, almost half of them for non-violent offenses.

Geography adds a complicating factor. Riverside County is approximately the size of New Jersey. The County Sheriff's office operates five existing jails, the eastern- and western-most about 180 miles apart. Part of the rationale advanced for the Whitewater site was its relatively central location relative to the county's population, making it a logical spot for a "hub" detention facility.

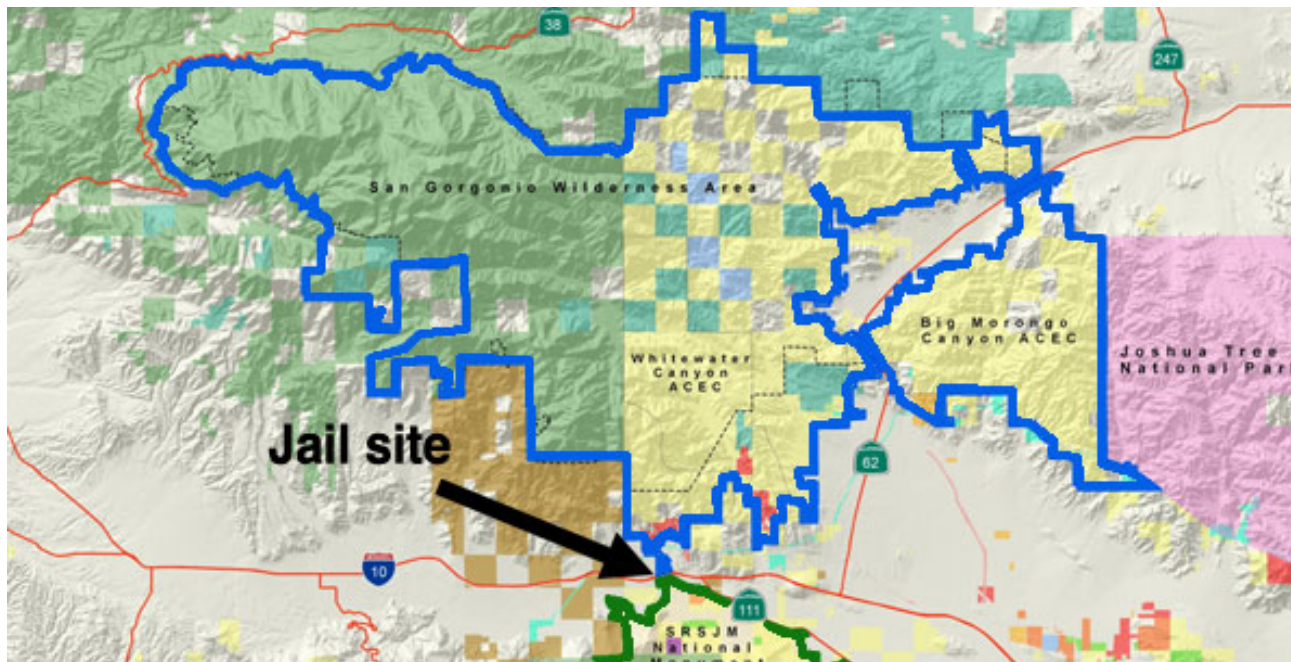
Opponents of the jail countered that a more sensible location for a new hub jail would be within the "Justice Center Triangle" described by County courts in Riverside, Murrieta and Banning.



A map published by Whitewater jail opponents to publicize their preferred alternative locations for a new county jail.

Leading the list of public concerns was the prospect of having a forbidding prison complex at the gateway to the Palm Springs area, whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism. Fears of increased crime in the area also colored the public discussion.

Environmental concerns over the project ranged from air quality and noise to impact on endangered species, including the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard. The site, adjacent to Interstate 10 just east of Cabazon, is part of a critical wildlife migration corridor between the Peninsular and Transverse ranges. As shown in the map below, the jail site is also wedged tightly between the existing San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains National Monument, and the Sand to Snow National Monument that would be created by Senator Dianne Feinstein's California Desert Protection Act. The proposed jail's location is indicated by the black arrow.



Whitewater Jail location relative to San Jacinto Natl.Mon. (green outline) and Sand To Snow N.M. (blue outline) | adapted from a map by californiadesert.org.

In an effort to assuage habitat concerns, the County amended the project last year to include a wildlife migration culvert beneath local roads adjacent to the project and I-10. Most greens remained unmoved, citing thousands of additional daily vehicle trips in the area, massive water consumption, and the generation of almost 700,000 gallons of sewage a day. The brightly lit jail would also have impinged upon the area's dark night skies, an issue that prompted national environmental groups the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club to pen letters of concern.

Now that the Whitewater jail seems to be off the drawing board, discussion is turning to alternatives. Expanding the existing jail in Indio has been mentioned as one possibility.

Ironically, the county recently completed an \$80 million upgrade of the Larry Smith Regional Detention Facility in Banning, ten miles west of the Whitewater site. The expansion added 582 beds to the Banning jail. County Sheriff Stan Sniff announced this month he would be closing 500 of those new beds due to budget cuts.