

Crime brings new construction

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magazine last month.

Emerge noted that the war on drugs has swept thousands of young black people off the street and into crowded detention facilities, though young blacks use fewer illegal drugs than whites and Hispanics.

In Mecklenburg, the jail population has increased from an average of 500 in 1989 to about 1,400 today, with peaks as high as 1,600.

Nearly 3 in 4 of Mecklenburg's detainees are black.

The Jail Central expansion is needed because of a jail population projection of 2,600 by the year 2005. Ironically, the population increase is not due to a substantial increase in the number of new admissions - about 105 per day - or the number of people sentenced to serve jail time. Most of those beds - 1,939 - will be needed to house people awaiting trial.

The new beds are solely for pre-trial detainees, said Mecklenburg County Sheriff Jim Pendergraph.

"The second phase wasn't expected to be needed so soon," he said.

Many people who wind up in jail are never convicted, or even tried. Because of a lack of judges, prosecutors and courtrooms, charges

are dropped against as many as 50 percent of pretrial detainees.

That bothers Pendergraph. "That's the highest percentage of dismissals in the state," said Pendergraph. "It's horrible."

Pretrial dismissals and other court problems also concern Mecklenburg County commissioners.

"It is more a problem of the court system than jails," said commissioner Hoyle Martin. "There are not enough district attorneys, judges, etc. A lot of people are just waiting to be tried. The bottleneck in the court system is one of the reasons why we have so many."

The increase in the pretrial population is due more to procedural changes rather than an increase in new arrests.

A jail study consultant found that fact unusual and predicted added pressure on the pretrial jail population when arrests rise to more accurately reflect the increase in law enforcement efforts and the growing county population.

More of those arrested are staying in jail longer - up to 43 days - before they are tried or their charges dismissed. The longer stays are due to restrictions on pretrial release, higher bonds and increasing reluctance of judges to release detainees. This has

occurred because of several highly publicized crimes - such as the murder of an east Charlotte fast food restaurant manager - committed while suspects were out on bond awaiting trial.

For now, the added 900 jail beds, available by the year 2000, will handle needs through 2005, according to Mecklenburg's consultants, Kimme and Associates Inc. of Champaign, Ill. That's assuming the projections that are much higher than those made in 1990 are correct this time. The numbers could go higher based on Mecklenburg's 3 percent annual population growth rate.

And that means it's less likely the county will be able to close the Specter Drive jail, where convicts are detained.

County officials promised the facility would be temporary.

"If they continue to have the jail population that they have, I don't see how they can close it," said Martin. "It was supposed to be a temporary facility, but we keep getting more inmates."

Commissioner Darrel Williams said jails represent society's inadequacies.

"When I see jails I see failure," he said. "Parks and Recreation (Department) did not do a bond this year. We were going to take \$20 million from parks and put in

the pot for schools and it ended up going to jails.

"It is frustrating...But the reality of it is jail space is needed and we need to provide money to put criminals away."

"That's why schools are so important, to try to reach kids and keep them from dropping out of schools and we won't continue to build jails at the pace we are now."

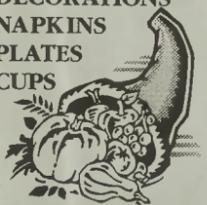
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Powell not interested in politics - yet

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himself out.

"I think that it would only be hurtful for him to have the suspense continue to grow and raise expectations," he said. "It does not play to his warrior image to look gun-shy."

Powell spokesman Bill Smullen said the retired general has ruled out a presidential race in less formal settings. "Whenever it comes up, that's his standard answer."

Asked if Powell meant to flatly rule out a presidential race in 2000, the spokesman said, "You can take that to the bank."

Powell, who rocketed to promi-

nence during the Gulf War, when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, toyed with the idea of running for president in 1996 but decided against it after speculation soared.

He raised some eyebrows when he agreed to speak at a motivational conference in Des Moines Tuesday. With its precinct caucuses opening the presidential nominating season, the state gets heavy attention from presidential candidates of both parties. Powell quickly made his point.

"I am not a candidate for political office," he said. "I made that decision in 1995 after a great deal

of deliberation. I plan to devote my energies to the work I'm doing in private life, charitable work, educational work."

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