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### ICE to delay pulling detainees until March

#### Etowah County Commission approves vacation buyback plan

By *Lisa Rogers*

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Just minutes after the Etowah County Commission approved a one-time buyback of vacation time for eligible county employees on Tuesday, they got word that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement planned to pull 350 detainees out of the Etowah County Detention Center on Saturday.

Without the funding the county receives for housing the detainees, finances looked bleak. It meant about 49 jobs would have to be cut immediately, and funding for housing detainees would stop.

With the possibility of such a huge loss in revenue, the county commission sent word to employees the buyback just before Christmas would not be possible.

The commission did not officially re-convene to rescind that action, but were expecting to do so later this week. With news on Thursday that any action by ICE to move detainees is postponed until at least March, they plan to move forward with the buyback plan, Etowah County Commission Chief Executive Officer Patrick Simms said.

Officials with ICE gave a verbal agreement on Thursday to leave about 300 detainees in the jail until March 31, according to a news release from Sheriff Todd Entrekin.

Transportation of detainees provided by the sheriff's office, to Charlotte, N.C.; Raleigh, N.C.; Charleston, S.C.; and Atlanta also will continue at this time.

"The positive progress made today is due to the diligent work of the Alabama congressional delegation," Entrekin said.

Entrekin, Simms, Chief of Corrections Scott Hassell, Etowah County Commissioner Tim Choate and District Attorney Jimmie Harp, who left Tuesday night for Washington D.C., have met with congressional leaders in an effort to stop the action by ICE.

Entrekin said jail officials were told Tuesday morning the detainees would be taken out of the facility on Saturday under a mandate from ICE headquarters in Washington, D.C., to "centralize operations" as a result of economic issues the federal government is facing.

Entrekin immediately notified Aderholt and other members of the Alabama congressional delegation, and local officials headed to Washington.

Aderholt said Wednesday the decision made by ICE "has been secretive, unprofessional and unfair."

The economic impact will affect all county employees and the entire county's economy because of a trickle-down effect, Entrekin said.

The detention center has housed illegal immigrants awaiting deportation since 1997 and has had a contract with immigration officials since 1998.



The county is paid \$41 per day per detainee, with an average of 324 detainees per day. The detention center has the capability of housing more than 324 detainees if needed.

Etowah County's contract with ICE is effective through 2014.

Simms said the loss not only will affect the sheriff's office, but all of the county's budget.

The county receives the \$5.2 million annually from the contract. After all expenses are paid, including \$500,000 annually toward a remaining \$3 million debt for the cost of jail renovations several years ago, the county and sheriff's office split the profit. It is about \$400,000 for each, he said.

The funds from ICE cannot be used for salaries, but they are used for a lot of sheriff's office costs for training and equipment that otherwise would have to come from the county's general fund, Simms said.

An expansion at the jail was completed in 2003 at a cost of about \$13.5 million. About \$8.4 million of the cost was paid with federal funds, and bed space was dedicated to ICE detainees. In the expansion, the county also increased the size of the female unit and made other improvements.

The buyback plan will allow employees who have the available vacation and sick time to buy back up to 80 hours of pay.

The offer is in lieu of a cost-of-living raise that would have been considered in January.

The county did not give employees a pay raise in the budget that went into effect Oct. 1. The commission planned to wait until the first quarter of 2011 to see how the budget year ended before deciding on the cost-of-living raise. The decision was made Tuesday to move forward with the buyback plan and wait about a permanent raise.

"It looks like now we're going to be able to do it after all," Simms said.

He said the delay until March 31 gives the county time to possibly work out something with ICE or look at other options to fill the bedspace currently used by detainees.

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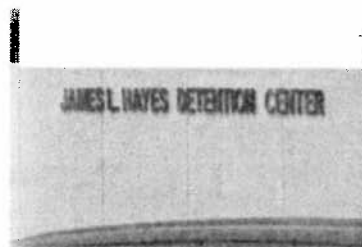
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## ICE center to stay in Etowah County

Posted: Apr 08, 2011 8:25 PM CDT  
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ETOWAH COUNTY, AL (WAFF) - Congressman Robert Aderholt announced that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has made a decision to stay at the Etowah County Detention Center.



The decision came after several months of meetings between the Etowah County Sheriff's Office, the Alabama congressional delegation, and ICE.

This will save more than 40 jobs and \$5 million a year in revenue for the county.

ICE will house an average of 325 detainees at the Etowah County Detention Center.

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