

King County officials have reached a federal court settlement that will help ease pressure to build another county jail.

The agreement between the county and the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington reverses a 1991 consent decree that would have forced jail officials to reduce the population of the high-rise downtown jail by 388 inmates because of deficiencies in security and inmate programs.

"It preserves the basic relief for unacceptable conditions that we obtained in the 1991 decree," said Julia Hampton, legal program director for the state ACLU.

Under the settlement agreement filed in U.S. District Court in Seattle Monday, the county can use 368 of the jail beds in question because of improvements in staffing, health care and other jail operations, said Art Wallenstein, county jail director.

That will go a long way toward dealing with a rising jail population that has hit the county's downtown jail and its suburban jail at the Regional Justice Center in Kent, he said yesterday.

And it means less need to build a proposed Eastside jail in Bellevue that would cost about \$100 million to build and more than \$20 million a year to operate, he added.

In seeking to avoid another jail construction project, County Executive Ron Sims recently appointed a task force of criminal-justice officials to search for ways to put a lid on the jail population without resorting to early release of sentenced inmates or restrictions on bookings of people for less serious crimes.

The settlement came in the "Hammer" case, named for **Calvin Hammer**, a county jail inmate who alleged in a federal lawsuit filed a decade ago that he was assaulted in the jail as the result of lax security. Other jail inmates joined the case, broadening allegations of poor jail conditions.

As the case progressed, it resulted in a series of court orders directing the county to make improvements and was a major factor in the county's decision to build a \$90 million suburban jail at the Regional Justice Center.

Under terms of the last court order, the county was to gradually discontinue use of 388 beds in the downtown jail after the suburban jail opened last year. However, a sharp rise in jail population this year prompted Sims to reopen negotiations with the ACLU on the downtown jail beds. And the settlement reached this week, subject to final court approval, is the result of those talks.

The settlement comes with a price. Boosting staffing at the downtown jail, along with staff increases needed to handle the population rise at the suburban jail, will cost county taxpayers \$2 million more next year.

This year, the additional cost for the jail staff increases will be about \$1.5 million.

As lawsuit-settlement talks were held amid the rising jail population, the county was permitted to continue to use more than 200 of the jail beds that were the subject of the talks.

Wallenstein said the settlement - which caps the downtown jail population at 1,697 inmates - means 150 more beds at the downtown jail soon will become available.

The average daily population in the downtown and suburban jails has been 2,814 this year, about 325 inmates above projected levels. The increase is because of an increase in bookings and arrests by police agencies across King County - primarily for felony crimes - as well as a 5 percent increase in the average length of stay for all inmates in the jail facilities.

