Nashville council rejects $144K settlement from detention center operator for escape of teens.

Nashville council members rejected a $144,000 settlement between Metro and the private operator of the city’s juvenile detention center for the costs the city incurred last fall during a round-the-clock manhunt to bring four escaped teens back into custody. Metro Law sought to settle a claim that Youth Opportunity investments breached its contract with the city when a cascade of employee errors and policy violations led to the teens escaping from the downtown detention center in November. But the resolution was short a vote Tuesday night that could have triggered a tie-breaker vote from Vice Mayor Jim Shulman, as Council member Jeff Syracuse failed to vote while presiding a president pro tem on the legislation. City attorneys could elect to submit the legislation for a new vote in a future council meeting. For weeks police mounted a search to locate the four teens, including two facing homicide charges, and the Metro Nashville Police Department’s Major Case Task Force led an investigation into the circumstances surrounding their escape. Ultimately several employees were fired because of the mistakes they made that allowed the teens to escape custody. The price tag for the whole ordeal, police estimate, totaled more than $253,000, including nearly $130,000 in police overtime and $11,300 for vehicle and helicopter use. Under the proposed settlement, the city would be reimbursed for more than the costs incurred outside regular shift hours worked by public safety personnel. But the amount, Council member Emily Benedict argued Tuesday night, is not enough punitive enough for the company — which gets paid that amount for less than three day under its contract with the city to run the detention center. “That’s all we’re receiving for this egregious error,” she said. Benedict is among other city leaders and advocates who have previously called for Metro to end doing business with for-profit prison companies including CoreCivic, which runs the Metro-Davidson County Detention Facility in South Nashville. “We must work together to get profiteers out of this business in Nashville. Making money by detaining people is immoral. And this incompetence is yet another example of putting profits ahead of people,” Benedict said. When the search was still underway, Juvenile Court Administrator Kathy Sinback briefed the Metro Council’s public safety committee in early December, reporting Youth Opportunity breached its contract when officials waited to properly alert authorities when they learned of the breakout. The failure, Sinback said, comes after several lapses court officials have seen from the group. “The contract specifically provides that (Youth Opportunity) is not to attempt to apprehend escapees, but rather is to call 911. (Youth Opportunity) has acknowledged several significant staff errors that led to the escape,” states an analysis by the Metro Law Department. In January, Youth Opportunity representatives publicly answered questions to the council committee on what led to the November escape and to share what changes have occurred since — including retraining all staff, increased efforts on recruitment and raising salaries for entry-level detention center employees from $12 to $15 an hour. “We have tightened the ship down,” Youth Opportunity President Jim Hill said in January. “I don't want to say it was the perfect storm, (but) the odds of this happening the way it happened was uncalled for and should never happen again with the changes we've made.” However, while the group “bears the majority of the fault,” they claim that the city was partially to blame for what occurred for failing to adequately maintain the security video system and for allegedly leaving a door open, which aided in the escape, according to Metro's legal analysis. During the January meeting, Judge Sheila Calloway said a power surge in March 2018 left camera systems “significantly damaged,” including in the detention center, which Calloway said was not directly relayed to the court. And while design of the facility was not the reason for the escape, “it certainly didn’t help,” she said. A study of the building showed several “inadequacies,” including having just one main entrance to access the detention center and the facility’s direct elevator access to the court. While a new juvenile detention center is on the capital improvements plan, it has not been funded in recent years and will likely not be anytime soon with the city's budget taking a massive hit from the March tornado and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The city’s five-year contract with Youth Opportunity is set to expire in July and Calloway, with the help of Davidson County Sheriff Daron Hall, has been studying what it would take for the city to possibly take over operations of the juvenile detention center. Though city officials have debated its future relationship with private prison operators, Hall and Calloway have previously said the city is not prepared to take on operations, even if funding were available. The discussion will be ongoing but not likely to see progress soon as the city works to deal with budget struggles and any significant new spending is being delayed or reconsidered by Mayor John Cooper's administration.