

February 27, 2012 at 1:00 am

State should resist reopening Baldwin prison

Pressure is mounting to reopen privately run Baldwin facility, despite decline in Michigan's inmate population

Lawmakers are understandably frustrated about setbacks in their effort to reduce prison costs but shouldn't be too quick to jump at a proposal for reopening a moribund, privately owned facility near Baldwin in the northwestern Lower Peninsula. At first glance, this plan makes little sense when the state already has more than enough beds to house a prison population that has been declining in recent years.

Assuming the 1,750-bed prison were reopened, the state Corrections Department would have to mothball at least one of its existing facilities, lay off the employees and shuffle their inmates to the Baldwin site. If all that could be accomplished and the state still could generate annual savings from such a move, only then would this proposal have merit.

Because of its shrinking inmate population, the state has closed eight prisons and seven prison camps in the past five years. Even after the most recent shutdown, the Mound Correctional Facility in Detroit, which closed last month, the Corrections Department reported that it had 700 surplus beds.

Legislation currently proposed in the Senate would be permissive in nature: It would allow — not require — the Corrections Department to reopen the prison if certain conditions can be met, including 5 percent annual savings compared to the costs of keeping the inmates behind bars in one of the other correctional centers. Based on current costs and assuming all the beds were filled, the savings would have to range from at least \$2.1 million to \$3.4 million a year — depending on which level of prisoners were kept at Baldwin, according to the Senate Fiscal Agency.

This prison has had a checkered history. It was built as a privately run 490-bed "punk" prison during the administration of Gov. John Engler, but it never was filled to capacity and ultimately was shuttered.

The corporate owners expanded the prison to its current size and announced a couple of years ago that it had a contract to house 2,580 California inmates for four years for \$60 million a year. That state's budget troubles evidently have thrown the deal into limbo, leaving an empty facility and Lake County short the 500 jobs it had expected to gain.


Lawmakers now are being lobbied to approve state involvement in a repopulating of the empty structure.

Meanwhile, a plan for the Corrections Department to take bids on privatization of all prison food preparation and health care is on hold after Attorney General Bill Schuette advised Corrections officials that legislation first is needed to let potential contractors use state-owned equipment without purchasing it, as well as to free a contractor from having to pay the minimum wage to any prisoners they employ.

The department also is taking bids from private firms for the operation of two state-owned facilities — the Woodland Center Correctional Facility at Whitmore Lake and a special alternative incarceration facility at Chelsea. Together, they hold around 800 inmates.

Under the circumstances, it might make sense to finish the current initiatives and see what cost savings result before risking a new venture. At the least, lawmakers must be careful to let corrections officials to explore the potential Baldwin deal — not pressure them into it.

If lawmakers are determined to reopen the Baldwin prison, they have to make sure they're doing it for the right reasons. The state Corrections budget isn't an economic development tool for a corporation saddled with costly empty prison beds — nor for a county with too few jobs.


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