

Inmates may have it right — prisons all about jobs



JEFF GERRITT

Many prison inmates swear the building boom in the penal system is a master plan to make money off them and create jobs, especially in the rural, mostly white areas where most prisons are. Plenty of inmates have told me this over the years.

If this prison-industrial complex sounds like a whack conspiracy theory, listen to Michigan state legislators. Republicans and Democrats have been beefing over whether to close a youth prison in Baldwin or the Newberry Correctional Facility in the Upper Peninsula. The debate isn't about which institution is best for rehabilitation, restitution or public safety — it's about jobs. When the fight's over, legislators might stick the state with an \$18-million-a-year tab for a prison it doesn't need.

Sounds like the inmates have it right.

Early this year, Gov. Jennifer

Granholm and the Michigan Department of Corrections sensibly proposed closing the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility. The Legislature's own independent auditor concluded the maximum-security prison was inefficient. It's also unnecessary. The so-called punk prison, run by a private, for-profit company, opened six years ago to handle an expected tsunami of young super predators. It never happened. Instead, the prison has taken mostly lower-security offenders; Corrections has enough spare beds to take them elsewhere.

But Republicans said shutting down the youth prison would bleed jobs from the hard-knock Baldwin area in Lake County. These are the same politicians who carp about government waste and inefficiency. They had another plan: Close Newberry Correctional Facility. That prison is in an area that, unlike Baldwin, Democrats represent in the state Legislature.

I've been inside the Newberry prison. It's generally well-managed and runs one of the country's top prison GED programs. Newberry also houses 1,100 inmates — too many for the state prison system to absorb if it closes. Still, instead of

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arguing the merits, Democrats went the same route as Republicans. Closing Newberry, they said, would also hurt a struggling local economy.

Things are tough all over Michigan, and I feel for the folks who stress about their jobs. Anyone who has been broke and out of work — and I have — knows that it makes you feel like less than zero. Anyone who grew up in a blue-collar family that lived paycheck to paycheck won't forget the fear that came home when the checks stopped.

Whenever it closes an institution, the state should do what it can to transfer and retrain the employees. Still, if paychecks are the main issue,

running an extra prison isn't the answer. The state would be better off to shut it down, anyway, and just mail out the checks for the next five years.

No doubt, prisons boost local economies. The Department of Corrections employs 3,000 people in the UP at nine prisons and five camps. It's the region's second largest employer. These aren't McJobs, either. Correctional officers earn up to \$42,000 a year. But that doesn't mean legislators, staring at an \$800-million budget hole, should view prisons as employment agencies. Michigan needs money for higher education, healthcare and other needs that are also paid out of the general fund. It doesn't need politicians running around the state vowing to save prisons when colleges are raising tuition by double digits.

Truth be told, most of the state's prisons should be in southeast Michigan, where most of the inmates come from. Maintaining family and community ties are important to inmates trying to change their lives. But prisons often get built in remote areas like the UP, where few people oppose them because they become a small community's biggest source of reces-

sion-proof jobs.

With nearly 50,000 people in state prisons, Michigan has one of the nation's highest rates of incarceration and prison spending. Prisons eat up nearly 20% of the state's general fund, or \$1.8 billion. Other states have found ways to safely spend a lot less on locking people up.

Corrections has started to control prison population and spending, after two decades of breakneck growth. It has diverted more offenders into community programs, developed programs to reduce recidivism and sent fewer parolees back to prison for technical violations. Michigan was one of the few states to reduce its prison population, if only slightly, in 2003 and 2004.

But having fewer prisoners to support won't do the people much good if politicians won't close prisons because they view them as economic development tools.

Inmates don't need conspiracy theories anymore to believe that's how the system works. All they need is the Legislature.

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