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State Prisons

Let needs and cost, not politics, pick ones to close

The fight over which state prisons to close has become ridiculously political.

Members of the state House, against all logic, approved closing Newberry Correctional Facility and Camp Manistique in the Upper Peninsula and keeping open the expensive and unnecessary Michigan Youth Correctional Facility in Baldwin. The state Senate ought to reject this plan.

For its size, the so-called punk prison is one of Michigan's most costly — and small wonder. It's run by the private, for-profit GEO Group Inc., whose CEO was paid \$2.2 million last year to run a prison system that's considerably smaller than Michigan's. The state's corrections director, Patricia Caruso, earns \$130,000 a year.

Of more importance, the youth prison, which opened in 1999, is no longer needed — and maybe never was. The expected wave of so-called super predators never happened. The maximum-security youth pris-

on, with gun towers and 16-foot razor wire fences, has been criticized for neglecting health and educational needs and for housing mostly lower-security offenders. The state's nonpartisan Office of the Auditor General recommended

reconsidering the state's contract with the prison. Corrections professionals, in the best position to evaluate prison needs, want to shut it down.

Republicans have argued that closing the youth prison would cost the Baldwin area, a Republican district, needed jobs. That's hard to deny. But the argument cuts both ways. Closing Newberry would equally harm that area's economy.

The larger point is that government is not an employment agency. It exists to provide necessary services.

Michigan can and should close a prison. Politics aside, the best choice for the state Senate is ending the contract with Michigan Youth Correctional Facility.



ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

The youth prison at Baldwin in a 1999 photo.