







Rell: Close Minimum-Security Webster Prison In Cheshire; AFSCME Union Local 387 Opposes Plan As Ill-Advised

By Christopher Keating on December 1, 2009 2:38 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

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In a highly unusual attempt to save money, the Rell administration is recommending the closure of a minimum-security prison in Cheshire.

Governor M. Jodi Rell announced Tuesday afternoon that the state's correction department is calling for closing the Webster Correctional Institution in Cheshire, which is known as a Level 2 facility on a scale where Level 5 is maximum security.

The closure would save an estimated \$3.4 million a year at a time when the state deficit is hundreds of millions of dollars and growing.

The recommendation marks a sharp contrast from the days when Connecticut was building prisons and rapidly expanding the amount of space to house convicted criminals. No prisons have been closed in recent state history, and the potential closure in Cheshire is sure to raise controversy.

Rell had ordered the correction department to come up with a recommendation for potentially closing a prison - a highly controversial step because it potentially involves moving both convicted criminals and staff members that range from first-year union members to the warden.

"We face an extraordinarily difficult budget situation - a challenge unlike any we have known in modern memory," Rell said in a statement. "The state prison population is currently about 18,300, down from nearly 19,900 in February 2008. While other states - including states facing even more severe budget problems than our own - are being forced to build new prisons, we can make the most of our successes by building on these achievements."

Rell continued, "Any decision such as this must always be made with public safety foremost in our minds. The recommendation from DOC notes that closing a minimum security facility is easier to accomplish because any inmates that need to be moved can be shifted to higher-security locations if necessary. The closure can also be accomplished without laying off any of the dedicated DOC staff, who perform one of the most dangerous - yet most necessary - tasks in state government."

The inmates will be moved to other prisons, rather than being released early.

"Governor Rell's decision to close a state prison in a system that is already overcrowded with inmates and understaffed with front-line workers does not make sense," said Dwayne Bickford, president of AFSCME Local 387. "We believe Connecticut's prison system was set up to handle 15,000 inmates but currently houses more than 18,000 inmates. Overcrowding is dangerous. It leads to higher incidents of assault on correctional staff and between inmates."

Webster, which opened its doors at 111 Jarvis St. in Cheshire in October 1990, is already partially closed as the state has shut down two of the four units during the past year. As such, about 220 inmates will need to be transferred - rather than the full capacity.

The recommendation says that the prison should be closed except for a separate building that is called the Webster Annex. The annex would then be run in conjunction with the Cheshire Correctional Institution.

Even though the recommendation calls for the prison to be closed, Rell has said that it would be reopened if necessary - due to a jump in crime or a higher level of convictions.

The prison shutdown would be accomplished over eight to 10 weeks, according to the acting commissioner, Brian K. Murphy.

State Rep. Michael P. Lawlor, one of the legislature's leading authorities on criminal justice, said the shutdown should not be difficult.

"It's like four big, open rooms with bunk beds," Lawlor said in a telephone interview. "There are no cells in there. People find that hard to picture. No prison cells at all. No bars. No nothing. Minimum security. If [the supermax in Somers] is filled with the worst of the worst, Webster is filled with the least of the least."

The closure is possible because the number of inmates has plummeted since a peak that followed the tragic murders of three members of the Pettit family in Cheshire on July 23, 2007.

The recommendation offers a budget-cutting option that Rell had once hoped to avoid. Such a move was never necessary during good economic times as the state was actually expanding its prisons. But as the inmate population has dropped and state tax collections remain weak, Rell ordered the Department of Correction more than three weeks ago to make its recommendation.

Closing a prison is a sensitive issue because it raises potential questions of safety for the inmates and a reshuffling of prison guards.

The state's prisons currently house about 18,350 inmates - about 1,600 below the peak in February 2008. The population exploded by about 1,200 after Rell froze the parole system following the triple homicide in Cheshire. Two longtime criminals who were out on parole at the time are now facing the death penalty if convicted in the slayings of three members of the Pettit family in a crime that shocked the state and caused the legislature to make changes in the state criminal justice system in a special session.

During budget deliberations earlier this year, Democratic legislators called for closing two prisons in an attempt to save as much as \$200 million annually. But Republicans, including Rell, questioned the idea at the time, saying that crime was still too high in cities throughout the state.

Now, though, the state's full-time parole board is operating efficiently and some re-entry programs have permitted criminals to get out of prison and resume their lives, Rell said.

Lawlor, the longtime Democratic co-chairman of the judiciary committee, has said that Rell's move is part of a national trend as the number of inmates has decreased. Governors in California, Texas, and Kansas have moved to closed prisons, and New York State has shut down prisons in recent years.

In a large system with thousands of employees, the turnover is so high that no layoffs would be necessary in the shutdown, Lawlor said. The need for overtime would also be reduced with fewer inmates. The prison system has 18 facilities and a budget of about \$700 million a year.

The all-time high population in the prisons was 19,894 inmates on Feb. 1, 2008, according to the correction department. That number has since fallen sharply, allowing the shutdown to be considered.