



Pressure to build for 2009 prison cuts

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As legislative inertia blocks most tough decisions, the planets have to align in order to get anything controversial done.

While Michigan's \$2 billion prison budget has been anything but inert, efforts to slash the inmate population and close prisons have stalled for years. That could finally change in 2009.

By the end of the month, the Justice Center at the Council of State Governments is expected to recommend a series of steps to create a more effective and affordable crime fighting strategy for Michigan.

The three goals are to increase the success of parole and probation, contain the costs of incarceration and enhance public safety in high-crime neighborhoods. Since Gov. Jennifer Granholm and legislative leaders asked for the report, it'll be hard for them to ignore it. Pressure is building to make sure they don't.

In the decade between 1996 and 2006, the Michigan Department of Corrections Budget grew by 40 percent. In the same period, violent crime decreased 11 percent. Money well spent, right? Nationally, in that period, violent crime fell 31 percent. Property crime dropped 16 percent in Michigan during that period, 25 percent nationally.

In 2006, Michigan had the highest rate of incarceration in the Midwest and the highest rate of violent crime.

Prisons consumed 16 percent of general fund revenue generated primarily from income and business taxes in 1996. This year, prisons will consume more than 26 percent.

Lawmakers have been complaining about the growth in the corrections budget for two decades now. What will drive change in 2009 are not just

credible policy recommendations but the political demands from others with a stake in the state budget.

Michigan will spend less in per-student state aid to universities in 2009 than it did in 1996 -- \$5,792 versus \$5,966. And that's not adjusted for inflation. What used to be alarming -- Michigan spending more on prisons than colleges -- has become more or less accepted.

Also accepted has been the assumption that while Michigan business would complain about its tax liability, it wouldn't engage in policy disputes over how tax dollars are spent.

Last month, business and civil leaders from around the state insisted that lawmakers enact long-term change in corrections policy with the aim of saving hundreds of millions annually. Such support is critical. Faced with a decision over whether to lock felons up or let them out, the safest course politically for lawmakers is to throw away the key.

But as those leaders, among them Michael Boulus of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan, Jeanne Englehart of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and Dan Gilmartin of the Michigan Municipal League, pointed out: what may politically safe is fiscally unsustainable in this economy.

Boosting per-student state aid to universities by just the level of inflation over the past 13 years would cost roughly \$600 million. The 2007 surcharge to the Michigan Business Tax, which business taxpayers want reduced, generated nearly \$625 million in fiscal 2008.

Given projected declines in overall tax revenue, making college more affordable or improving the state's business climate can really only come by either raising taxes on individuals or cutting existing spending.

Key to reducing prison costs is slashing the number of inmates in state facilities.

Lawmakers last year did fund pilot projects to place the mentally ill in treatment rather than prison. Local programs would be modeled after the diversionary success of drug courts, of which there are now more than 80 around the state.

Significant savings requires revamping guidelines to cut sentences, releasing eligible inmates upon their parole date if not earlier, reducing the number of those sent back to prison for parole violations

and whacking operating costs. The Detroit Regional Chamber says taking those steps could free up \$800 million.

That's real money. Lawmakers should be pressed hard on the fact that there are better ways to spend it, cutting business taxes and college tuition being two of them.

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