

DRAFT MINUTES

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS Meeting Jointly

Wednesday, September 24, 2014

The Senate and House Committees on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs met jointly on Wednesday, September 24, 2014, at 10:00 a.m. in the Willis H. Sargent Training Academy, England, Arkansas.

Members in Attendance

The following committee members attended: Senators Eddie Joe Williams, Chair; and Jimmy Hickey. Representatives Andrea Lea, Chair; Bob Ballinger, Nate Bell, Fonda Hawthorne, Mary Hickerson, Debra Hobbs, Karen Hopper, Jim Nickels, and Betty Overbey.

Other legislators in attendance were: Senator Jon Woods. Representatives Walls McCrary, James Ratliff, and Mary Slinkard.

The meeting was called to order by Senator Williams.

Opening Remarks

Senator Eddie Joe Williams stated the purpose for having the meeting at Willis H. Sargent Training Academy was to look at the facilities and see what can be done to an abandoned school. Opening the training academy not only saved the state \$5 million in building costs but also saved the school district from yearly debt payments and brought huge economic impact to the city of England. There are many vacant government-owned school facilities around the state that can be renovated as an alternative to building a new facility.

Welcome and Comments

Mayor Danny Maynard, city of England, Arkansas, welcomed and expressed his appreciation to everyone present for the meeting.

History and Discussion of the former England Middle School Building

Mr. Eddie Johnson, Superintendent, England School District, presented the history of England Middle School. The facility was established as a private school called England Academy in 1970 and was operational until 1991. England School district bought the facility in 2000 to house the district middle school. The middle school was closed in 2008 due to very low enrollment rates. In 2013, the Arkansas Department of Correction (ADC) bought the facility. Mr. Johnson mentioned it has been a positive development for the school district, for the city, and for the ADC.

Overview of the Renovations and Tour of the Willis H. Sargent Training Academy

Mr. Fred Campbell, Director of Training, Arkansas Department of Correction, stated the ADC Training Academy is one of the largest law enforcement academies in the state. They held 17 classes last year with more than 700 graduates and this year they will have over 800. He presented a brief history on how the ADC Training Academy was established starting in 1976 after a grant from the Rockefeller foundation. The training academy went operational in 1980 starting with a two room training facility and with Willis Sargent as the first training director. In April 2014, the England Middle School was acquired by the ADC for \$300,000 and was converted to the Willis H. Sargent Training Academy with a total renovation cost of \$200,000. The academy has eight classrooms, a full gymnasium, a 31-unit computer classroom, an auditorium with kitchen, and four housing units.

After the presentation, Mr. Campbell facilitated the tour of the facilities within the Academy.

Presentation of the Vacant Black Rock School Campus [Exhibit F]

Representative James Ratliff, District 60, presented the facilities in the vacant Black Rock School Campus that was closed in May 2014 due to declining enrollment. There are a total of 12 buildings including a multipurpose building, the Home Economics and Agricultural building, the High School building, and several elementary school buildings. The facility has 2 gymnasiums, a cafeteria and a computer lab. It is located 133 miles from Little Rock.

Presentation and Discussion of Vacant School Buildings around the State [Exhibit G]

Commissioner Tony Wood, Arkansas Department of Education, presented a total of 41 school districts with vacant school facilities, 165 vacant buildings in all. He mentioned the information was a result of a survey but not all districts have responded. Mr. Wood stated if legislators know of any vacant facility or is interested in looking at a specific location, he will contact the superintendent of the school district to get more information.

Status of Prison Overcrowding Study [Exhibit H.1, H.2, and H.3]

Mr. Richard Wilson, Assistant Director, Bureau of Legislative Research, presented the comparison of three bond issues for the new prison proposal: the 15-year issue requiring a total of \$122.55 million; the 20-year bond issue requiring \$134.40 million; and the new 30-year financing proposal prepared by the ADC requiring a total of \$186.65 million. ADC's new proposal used a "wrap-around" bond issue that will use previous available benefit added to an additional \$2 increase in decals. Mr. Wilson stated the 30-year term will provide enough annual revenue to fund the bond issue but the downside to a longer term is the significant increase in financing costs.

Mr. Wilson reported on drug courts expenditures. Currently each drug court spends \$163,700 a year, a total of \$7.04 million for 43 drug courts. In addition, they are spending a total of \$10.2 million of volunteer time from judges, attorneys and public defenders. Ms. Sheila Sharp, Director, Arkansas Community Correction, commented on the need for additional supervision officers to improve the parole and probation system across the state. She suggested parole and probation use the principles that make the drug courts work and have a risk and needs assessment on the front end. Senator Williams requested that Ms. Sharp quantify her suggestion in a report.

Mr. Wilson presented comparative information among southern states on corrections issues. Arkansas ranked 8th in adult inmate population housed in state correctional facilities and had a 20% increase in inmate population from 2003 to 2013. Arkansas ranked 9th among southern states on state inmates housed in state and local jails as of July 1, 2013, with a total of 14,756 state inmates, ranked 10th on system wide average operating cost per inmate per day at \$62.93, has an average caseload per probation/parole agent of 108 slightly lower than the average 124.6, and ranked 3rd highest total inmates, probationers, and parolees per 100,000 population at 2,397.

Comments

Chairman Benny Magness, Arkansas Board of Correction, requested that the Board of Correction be invited to address the committee when issues related to corrections are discussed. He made comments on three issues. First on the request to build a new 1,000 bed prison. Currently there are 2,171 state inmates backed up in county jails, 1,918 offenders on parole who have absconded, and 676 inmates above capacity in ADC prisons. Arkansas prison population is growing by 40 inmates per month, totaling 936 inmates in two years. ADC cannot keep up with this growth without building a new prison especially a maximum security facility. Next Mr. Magness discussed the suggestion to send inmates out of state. The Board of Corrections supports this suggestion only as a temporary solution. Lastly, he stated the original purpose of ACT 570 was to slow the growth of inmates, not reverse it. ACT 570 delayed the building of a new prison by 6 years, saving the state of Arkansas \$90 million in operating cost, not taking into account construction cost.

During the discussion, it was clarified that Mr. Nick Robbins, present during the committee meeting on August 19, 2014, was not representing Pathway to Freedom but rather a whole new work-release program as an alternative solution to prison overcrowding.

Senator Williams requested from ADC a report on the square footage of state prisons compared to inmate population and whether there is any federal law that dictates the standard.

Date of Next Meeting

The next committee meeting to discuss prison overcrowding will be October 20, 2014, at 10:00 a.m., in the Department of Correction facility in Pine Bluff.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:45 p.m.