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The Capitol Report for the Week of Aug. 2, 2018

**Prison debate becomes election issue in Wisconsin**

Prisons are likely to be a big issue this election season

After Gov. Scott Walker’s troubles with youth prisons, much of the current debate is about who should be in adult prisons, whether new facilities are needed and avoiding the pitfalls of a privately built prison in Stanley.

Three Republicans from northeastern Wisconsin recently touted a plan to close the aging Green Bay Correctional Institution.

Reps. David Steffen and Andre Jacque and Sen. Robert Cowles joined officials from the village of Allouez on Aug. 8 to announce they'd received more than 1,000 signatures on a petition calling for the 1897 facility to be decommissioned and replaced by a privately built yet publicly run facility.

"The goal is to have all of this proof ... present this to the administration saying this is the time. This is the time to incorporate this opportunity into the state budget," Steffen, R-Green Bay, said at a news conference.

Steffen argued a new facility would allow for more opportunities to lower recidivism, such as programming that targets mental health and vocational training.

And Cowles, R-Green Bay, highlighted upcoming Department of Corrections and legislative audits he argues will likely support the need for a new facility.

"We need all that information to hopefully get our arms totally around places where we're bleeding money," Cowles said.

The call for the decommissioning of the site came just a day after Gov. Scott Walker at a stop in Milwaukee blasted Democratic gubernatorial candidates for calling for a much lower prison population.

Walker said it's a myth that the state's prisons are filled with nonviolent drug offenders. He argued the path forward includes alternatives to incarceration and technical and vocational training for inmates.

Steffen previously authored a bill that would have meant the state would partner with a private company to build a new prison that it would then lease.

Some of his critics at the time sounded alarm bells at a similar project — the Stanley Correctional Institution — that was built by a private company without the state's directive and failed to meet standards. Cowles said he's also concerned about a repeat of Stanley and emphasized Joint Finance and Building Commission oversight on any plan for a new prison.

The state bought the facility for $80 million in 2001 under former Gov. Scott McCallum and spent $7.5 million on upgrades between 2003 and 2006, although some of those upgrades include regular maintenance.

The petition's plan calls for the prison site to be sold and redeveloped. Proponents maintain the current facility could be turned into a mixed-use area that would add to the allure of downtown Allouez while increasing the property tax base.

"Allouez is a small community, three miles by three miles, and we're completely developed," Village President Jim Rafter said. "To stay with the times and pay our bills without dramatically increasing taxes, we have to find a better way to use the properties we have."

Petitioners argue the state could commission a private company to build and own a prison in rural Brown or an adjacent county while the state would lease the facility and run it.

Supporters of the petition argue the existing prison has a looming $200 million in repairs and long-term maintenance costs for the Green Bay facility, overcrowding, a high number of inmate-on-staff assaults and high operational costs.

They say a newly built facility could bring new jobs and economic development to the area, along with potential state dollars for roads leading to the new facility.*The Capitol Report is written by editorial staff at WisPolitics.com, a nonpartisan, Madison-based news service that specializes in coverage of government and politics, and is distributed for publication by members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association.*

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