



August 21, 2014, 06:30 am

Of prisons and patronage

The jaded saga of Thomson Correctional Center in Thomson, Ill. continues to lurch forward. On Monday, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) **announced** that Donald Hudson, the former warden of Federal Correctional Institution, Ray Brook, would be at the helm at Thomson when (if?) it eventually opens. While this might be seen as progress to some, it is more emblematic of the continuing political patronage than of sound criminal justice policy.

For the uninitiated, the Thomson facility has been a sore spot in Illinois criminal justice policy since 2001. Costing Illinoisans hundreds of millions of dollars start-up costs, the facility has **remained dormant** ever since. Years of weak budgets unable to fund the operational overhead and resistance from powerful labor interests that feared facility closures in other parts of the state left Thomson as a vacant monument to inefficiency.

A renewed interest in Thomson cropped up in 2009 when the current administration **tasked** the Department of Defense to acquire and activate the facility as a replacement for the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay. The remaining capacity, administered by the BOP, would serve to alleviate federal prison overcrowding. However, funding for the **prisoner transfer** was blocked, again stalling the prison's activation.

Undeterred, the federal government plodded on with the activation plan, having invested over \$220 million in the facility to date, according to Sen. Dick Durbin's (D-Ill.) Monday **press release**. "For many, this has been a long, slow journey and I understand the frustration felt by the Thomson community. But today's announcement is proof positive that there is steady progress being made in the effort to get this top-notch facility up and running as a federal prison," Durbin said in the statement.

Yes, to some, the future christening of the Thomson facility must have seemed like a win-win-win scenario for folks in Illinois. The state was able to write off much of the cost brought about by this careless expansion, lawmakers were able to keep some government jobs in a hardscrabble rural area, and the BOP would soon be able to ease some of its overcrowding issues. Thomson's economic impact has been (creatively) estimated to be **\$122 million**.

By this Keynesian math, opening prisons would be a strictly profit-making venture. Rural poverty could be eliminated wholesale if the United States could only build enough prisons. Specifically, Illinois could solve its manifold budgetary issues by underwriting the cost of the Thomson facility itself. All facetiousness aside, correctional budgets stretching back decades have shown this not to be the case.

There is still the matter of facility overcrowding. In fiscal year 2013, **federal prisons** were collectively at 136 percent of rated capacity, with each inmate costing nearly \$30,000 to house. Thomson's activation stands to lighten some of the capacity strain, though the cost will jump significantly with an additional facility, adding around \$50 million in operational expenses alone to the BOP's near \$7 billion budget.

Arresting prison population growth while keeping the public safe is one of a few issues on which Congress is showing bipartisan agreement. Academics, practitioners and politicians from all across the political spectrum have highlighted **meaningful ways** federal law and corrections policy can be reformed at no detriment to public safety. Reducing overcriminalization, using community corrections, expanding in-facility incentive programs and removing barriers to reentry are but a handful of reforms that will reduce the BOP's burden on the taxpayer. States of all sizes have capitalized on this strategy to reduce their own correctional populations.

There is a twofold lesson here. First, poor decisions made at the state level, then discharged to the federal government, is not a problem solved. Rather, what were once red lines in Illinois's ledger have now been shared across the nation. The economic benefit directly enjoyed in northwestern Illinois is being underwritten by every taxpaying Oregonian, Texan and New Yorker. Second, the necessity of this facility is artificial. Federal prison overcrowding can be greatly diminished, if not eliminated, with sensible criminal justice reform. Several bills currently before Congress would bring about these necessary changes. Opening a new facility represents a step in the wrong direction and only serves to benefit a few interested parties.

Opening facilities for the sake of jobs is unsustainable fiscal and criminal justice policy. Lawmakers should only seek to build or expand facilities as a last resort. Before passing a yearly obligation of \$50 million on to the American taxpayer to the benefit of a select few, try serious criminal justice reforms.

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TAGS: Federal Bureau of Prisons, BOP, Dick Durbin, Illinois, Thomson Correctional Center