

Prison Reform: A giant leap forward through the replacement of GBCI

By: State Representative David Steffen

Recently, I re-introduced a modified legislative proposal that closes and replaces the most dangerous prison in Wisconsin: Green Bay Correctional Institution (GBCI). This 121-year-old maximum-security facility has exceeded its lifespan and no longer meets acceptable worker safety requirements, inmate rehabilitation/re-entry standards or structural integrity levels of a state prison facility. So now what? We have choices as a state regarding this crumbling facility, but none of them are easy. Our options as a state government generally fall into three buckets:

1. Fix GBCI by spending over \$200 million in identified mission-critical repairs;
2. Ignore the problem while expenses, safety, and security issues continue to mount; or
3. Permanently address the structural and operational challenges while also integrating enhanced inmate re-entry success rates by building a replacement facility elsewhere in the area.

While none of these choices are simple, your elected officials are hired to resolve problems like this, even when perfect solutions aren't available. But wait, David – isn't closing GBCI and NOT replacing it a fourth option? As a society, aren't we moving in the direction of less incarceration? While there are definite, positive moves in this direction, these initiatives are almost universally designed for our non-violent, low-risk offenders, not the violent criminals populating this maximum-security prison. GBCI (or my proposed replacement facility) will still be a necessary part of our society's correctional system.

While we continue to need these facilities, we can create and operate prisons that are safer, less expensive and deliver better results for the inmate. For this reason, I've spent the last four years researching the most successful facilities in the world. The good news: there are facilities and operations that retain their core correctional responsibilities, while also providing a safe work environment with better rehabilitation and community reentry outcomes. Here's more good news: It costs less too.

The state has spent nearly \$850,000 since 2009 to understand the challenges at GBCI and our other prisons. Finally, our government is positioned to take a giant leap forward in prison reform. This giant leap begins with my proposal.

There are four separate provisions within my legislative proposal, each addressing the major challenges associated with this transformational opportunity:

Provide two separate financing options for a replacement facility

Last session, my proposal provided a single financing option – a lease to own arrangement. This session's proposal retains this popular, most cost-effective model, while also offering a "Door #2" for Governor Evers. A traditional, state bonding model has been added as a second financing option for this facility. Both are viable and widely used by our government for state-operated

facilities. By providing two options to Governor Evers, he can decide how this project is best reflected on the state's financial books and decide how much money he'd like to save (long-term) on this project. To be clear, both options require the state to be in control of the design, oversight and staff employment.

Identify and collaborate with a new host community. GBCI currently operates within a 33-acre compound in the village of Allouez. My proposal recommends a new host site 2-3 times the current acreage in a to-be-determined rural Brown County community or adjacent county. This amount of space allows for facility design flexibility and maximizes the buffer area with adjacent landowners. Additionally, this replacement prison needs to stay in the Green Bay area for staff retention and attraction purposes. A final requirement of this provision is to compensate the host community with either property tax revenue from a taxable lease-to-own facility or a state-authorized payment in lieu of taxes amount to the municipality and county. These provisions will increase the openness and options relating to locating this facility while mitigating the problems we've seen recently with the Lincoln Hills relocation effort.

Build a facility with increased treatment and space for the inmates. By far, this is the most important part of the proposal and jumpstarts our state's effort at comprehensive prison reform. Warehousing double-bunked men in 56 square foot prison cells for years with limited chances for a successful post-incarceration life helps no one. Since 90% of GBCI's inmates will be released back into our community, we all benefit from a facility and operation that is built specifically to offer proven recidivism-reduction services including educational, vocational and mental health services along with a healthy dose of life training. An important note: while it may seem counter-intuitive, a new facility also saves the taxpayers money. Instead of spending over \$200 million in repairs to GBCI, we can build a new, operationally efficient prison that can save the taxpayers up to \$170 million over the next 20 years. Additional savings are also expected from a lower recidivism rate (saving \$33,000 per year, per inmate), but those estimates are not included in my calculations.

Sell the existing prison property and adjacent state land. The state owns about 60 acres of land in and around GBCI. After the new facility is built and the staff and inmates are transitioned (likely in 2023) to the new complex, GBCI will be decommissioned and sold. As widely reported, Allouez's \$100 million plan for this property is considered the largest and best re-development opportunity in Allouez's history. Speaking of history, it is important to know that Allouez fully intends to retain the primary structure's historical elements and park-like frontage.

Our state's prison system has never faced more challenges than it does today. Overcapacity prisons, overworked staff, alarming worker safety concerns and an unacceptable recidivism rates are unfortunate hallmarks of our state's prison system and especially GBCI. While replacing the most dangerous prison in Wisconsin will not solve all these challenges, it is undoubtedly a giant leap forward for prison reform.