

3 new prisons, more treatment programs are sought

Biggest expansion in a decade proposed to keep pace with convict growth

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Prison officials said Friday that they want to build three prisons and boost drug- and alcohol-treatment programs in the biggest proposed expansion of Texas corrections programs in more than a decade.

Brad Livingston, executive director of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, said the \$520 million plan — part of a \$5.6 billion, two-year budget being sought by the prisons agency — is designed to keep pace with steadily growing numbers of prisoners that will require more than 11,000 additional prison beds in five years, according to official estimates.

"This is a multipronged approach designed to allow us to keep up with the growth that is currently projected," he said. "In addition to hard beds (prisons), we're requesting additional funding for treatment and diversion programs."

The request comes as all state agencies begin crafting their requests for the 2008-09 budget, which begins in September 2007. State parks officials also submitted a budget request Friday that could lead to more cutbacks at parks.

Texas tripled the size of its prison system in the early 1990s to keep up with growing numbers of convicts that, at one point, required more than 30,000 prison-bound felons to be housed in county jails.

Since then, several thousand additional beds have been added in several small projects that increased the system to a capacity of about 152,000 beds.

Drug treatment and community programs were also expanded, though funding to some of those programs has been scaled back in recent years because of budget cuts made by the Legislature.

In recent weeks, as details of the new expansion plans leaked out, Senate and House leaders questioned whether building prisons is the answer.

Instead, they backed more treatment and community-based corrections programs that are much cheaper to operate. Citing a continuing shortage of guards, they also questioned whether enough workers can be found to properly staff new prisons.

Livingston said Friday that public safety remains the priority. He noted that the proposed budget, which must be approved next spring by the Legislature, seeks a 3-percent pay raise for prison employees that could help the hiring problems when coupled with a similar raise workers will get next month.

State agencies have been asked to submit budget requests that are 10 percent less than their current budget. In their budget proposal, prison officials warned, however, that cuts would result in varied problems.

If the 10 percent cuts are implemented, the Parks and Wildlife Department's budget would fall \$14.21 million for each of the next two years.

Dozens of state parks would be forced to cut services and hours of operation and several parks could close, the department said. Law enforcement, the local parks grant program and wildlife research would also be affected. In addition to asking that the state not follow through on the proposed budget cuts, the department's wish list included more money for game wardens, repairs to the battleship Texas in La Porte and restoring the Texas State Railroad, a historic railroad slated to become a museum because of high maintenance costs.

Joseph B.C. Fitzsimons, chairman of the board of the Parks and Wildlife Commissioners, told budget officials that paying for state parks is essential to their future.

"Will the Texas school children of tomorrow only know about our open spaces by seeing pictures in a book or images on a screen?" he wrote. "Texas is supposed to be different, and one of the things that make us different is our relationship to the land. That relationship will be lost if we do not provide great parks for a great state."

The state has fallen behind in recent years in its ability to pay for park operations and upkeep. The condition of Texas parks and proposals to shift more money to them have become key issues in this year's governor's race.

More prisons

- 2,750-bed prison
- 1,330-bed prison
- 1,000-bed privately run prison, with 500 beds for a DWI treatment center

More treatment programs

- 250 additional beds in special drug-treatment prisons
- 200 additional beds in substance-abuse treatment centers for parole-bound convicts
- 150 additional beds in private halfway houses
- 250 additional beds in community-based specialized-treatment programs designed to get low-level offenders the help they need without sending them to a state prison

More money for health care

- \$122 million to avoid a deficit in prison health care operations
- \$434 million a year to pay for operating expenses

Source: Texas Board of Criminal Justice,

Legislative Appropriations Request

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