

## **New prisons will cost taxpayers money, so be sure they're needed**

Editorial Board

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State officials want \$5.6 billion from the Legislature to run the criminal justice system for the next two years — including \$520 million just to build three more prisons and fund drug and alcohol treatment programs. Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, however demands that officials justify the full house they have now before starting new ones and he is absolutely right.

Whitmire, chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, thinks there could be thousands of inmates who could be released, thereby sharply reducing the need for new prisons — and saving taxpayers a lot of money.

"We're at a crossroads," Whitmire said Tuesday. "We can continue to do business as usual, or we can be smart, make corrections, enhance public safety and save millions of dollars." He thinks the public has been ready to see more emphasis on treatment programs for those in prison because of alcohol or drug offenses, and the Legislature, he said, appears to be reaching the same conclusion.

Like Whitmire, the House Corrections Committee chairman, Rep. Jerry Madden, R-Richardson, also thinks there are too many low-risk inmates in high- or medium-security beds. Of about 5,600 prisoner trustees eligible for parole, most are serving time for drug and property crimes, not violent offenses, prison statistics show.

One problem that lawmakers and state criminal justice officials agree on is the need for more alcohol and drug treatment programs. Whitmire said that about 900 prisoners otherwise ready for parole could get out if they could complete a treatment program — but there aren't enough slots in the programs.

There are also 5,481 minimum-security prisoners being held on drunken-driving convictions, and many of them must go through a treatment program — as well they should — if they are to ever qualify for parole.

Whitmire also suspects that the prison system is holding on to some prisoners who are trusted to work unsupervised outside prison walls, and even eligible for parole, because of their usefulness as laborers. But prison officials deny that, noting that they don't make parole decisions.

Some Texans would be satisfied to just stuff ever more prisoners into existing prison buildings, and maybe put up some tents and let them live in escalating misery. Actually, that's what the

state used to do, but the federal courts finally imposed some minimum standards of decency for prisoners.

That's why the Legislature, in its upcoming session, must decide whether to build more prisons to house a growing prison population — now at 135,000 convicts — or safely release more prisoners to make way for new ones.

The trouble with new prisons is that the construction cost is only the start; there follows the never-ending bills for paying guards and staff, feeding prisoners and providing them with medical care. Of course, paying new guards might not be a problem because the state probably couldn't find any. It's already 2,500 guards short.

Given the state's growth and its hard-nosed attitude toward lawbreakers, some new prison construction may be inevitable. But first, fully funding effective treatment programs for alcohol and drug abuse deserves legislative attention — that would benefit both the prisoners and the rest of us, who wish to live in a safe society.

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