

One New Prison, Two New Prisons, Three New Prisons, Four...

by Keith Wm. DeBlasio

Remember the old school yard game about one potato, two potato, three potato, four... Well, this is more suitable for the General Assembly's budget game with new prisons in Virginia.

It has been reported that the Governor Mark Warner's (D) plan would add one new prison in Virginia, with the House of Delegates concurring, while the Senate's budget proposal would add two new prisons. However, none of this is completely accurate.

In fact, the Senate's Budget Bill (SB 30) would leave a line item (420 #3s) with an undisclosed amount for a third (in the Mount Rogers Planning District) and a fourth new prison (in Charlotte County). This is in addition, to the two new prisons for which \$142,198,000 has been allocated by way of amendments to Senate Bill 39, a bill originally intended to finance the undertaking, development, acquisition and construction of the first phase of the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS), introduced by Senator Kenneth Stolle (R-Virginia Beach), who recused himself from the vote on the bill due to a conflict of interest. These two new prisons slipped into the Radio System bill by amendments are destined for Tazwell and Pittsylvania Counties.

In addition to the Senate's approval for these four new prisons, the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS) bill provides for a \$21,908,000 expansion of Deerfield Correctional Center, a \$32,475,000 for expansion of St. Bride's Correctional Facility (originally to be covered by federal VOITIS grant monies), \$3,000,000 for undisclosed roof repairs to state prison facilities, a \$7,900,000 prison dairy and dairy processing plant at an undetermined location, and more. While at the same time, the actual Budget Bill provides for the loss of out of state prisoners, and provides an undetermined amount for the increased numbers of state responsible prisoners in local jails at increased rates.

On the other side of the General Assembly, the House Budget Bill does not actually provide for building new prisons with state funds. Actually, Delegate Chris B. Saxman (R-Staunton) presented legislation that would place a moratorium on new prison building, unless such construction was contracted with private financing. This legislation (HB 1042) passed the House of Delegates with a vote 93 to 5.

The House of Delegates provided for the loss of out of state prisoners and the increased penalties for persons convicted of abusing incapacitated adults and multiple DUI offenders (HB 30 – Item 420.10 #1h), but deleted the \$7,900,000 for new dairy facilities. Perhaps the denial of new dairy facilities by the House can also be contributed to Delegate Saxman's intent to use private contracts at reduced costs for many prison expenses, including food services.

It is understandable that Delegate Saxman is set on demonstrating responsible spending in the area of corrections, since many of his constituents lost jobs or were transferred to

far off locations when Staunton Correctional Center was closed last year. This facility is actually up for sale under a bill (SB 516) presented by Senator Emmett Hanger (R-Mount Solon), which originally would have sold the former Staunton Correctional Center to the local Industrial Authority for the sum of \$1.

Why close the correctional facility in Staunton while taking a loss on the property, then turn around and propose one, two, three, or even four new prisons in other areas? Why hide major prison spending costs in a bill related to the Statewide Agencies Radio System? Perhaps it is a way to compete for increased government provided jobs in local areas where the legislators have more clout. Perhaps it is a way for conservatives to liberally disperse public money while hiding behind more acceptable 'tough on crime' platforms. Or, perhaps it is an attempt to keep the public from realizing the vast amounts being spent to confine more and more nonviolent offenders, many of whom could better serve the public interest by receiving alternative sentences where they remain employed rather than draining our pockets. In any case, it is irresponsible spending that depletes the money available for education, health care, transportation, etc.

The Secretary of Public Safety and the Virginia Sentencing Commission acknowledge the need for less incarceration and more alternative sentences. After all, 85% of Virginia's prisoners are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses. Senator Hanger has expressed his commitment to seeking out these alternatives, and his unwillingness to increase prison beds. However, when deceptive tactics are used to tack prison spending on to unrelated pieces of legislation, which legislators want to support, even well intended commitments may have to be forgotten.

At this point, it doesn't seem that the Governor and the Virginia Senate are being straightforward. Nine Republican Senators, along with the House majority, are standing fast in their commitment to their constituencies not to increase taxes and not to spend state money irresponsibly. No matter what their positions may be on new prisons, at least these Members are practicing above-board legislating. After all, even when the former Governor George Allen (R) built two unnecessary supermax prisons, he did so with full knowledge of the citizens of Virginia – nothing hidden.

Remember, Governor Warner and the Democrats claim that there is a one billion dollar shortfall, yet almost half of this is represented in increased prison and corrections spending.

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