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Expensive Prisons

In the last decade, crime rates and the prison population have declined significantly in New York State. Yet prison costs have soared. As part of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's search for ways to cut spending, his new budget proposes two sensible steps toward the long overdue goal of closing down unnecessary prisons.

First, he promises to create a task force to identify which prisons could most efficiently be shut down. If the commission fails to act — and it will certainly come under strong political pressure not to from local politicians and unions — the decision would fall to the commissioner of corrections.

Second, he asks the Legislature to repeal a law that requires the state to provide a 12-month notice before closing a prison. Until that happens, the state will be required to keep empty prisons staffed for as long as a year before shuttering them.

The case for closures is clearly laid out in the governor's executive budget. It notes that the inmate population has dropped from a peak of about 71,600 in 1999 to about 56,000 today. Nevertheless, the corrections budget has risen from \$2.3 billion in 2000 to \$2.8 billion today.

Given the decline in the number of inmates, the state should find it easy to close or downsize several of its 67 prison units without compromising its ability to handle an unanticipated increase in the population.

An analysis by the corrections department shows a particularly large number of vacancies in minimum- and medium-security prisons for women, with occupancy rates of 57 percent and 66 percent, respectively. These prisons, too, could be expeditiously consolidated, saving hundreds of millions of dollars throughout the decade.

The state should also look closely at maximum-security prisons, which tend to be larger, more intensively staffed and, thus, more expensive. Though some of these facilities have high-occupancy rates, the evidence suggests that low-risk offenders who were assigned to them could be safely and less-expensively housed in lower-security institutions.

Local lawmakers traditionally have opposed closing or downsizing prisons because they fear a loss of jobs. To ease those fears, Mr. Cuomo proposes a \$100 million economic redevelopment fund that, among other things, could be invested in retrofitting empty prisons for commercial use. The administration will face

resistance from the prison workers' unions that have great power in the State Legislature. Mr. Cuomo's goals are worthy, but he'll have to press hard to reach them.