

Let stakeholders decide prisons' future

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Was that a mild threat from Sen. Michael Nozzolio when the Seneca County Republican complained about the process Gov. Andrew Cuomo plans to use to find \$72 million in savings from likely prison closures?

For the sake of New Yorkers who want state lawmakers to stop haggling and adopt an on-time, fiscally responsible state budget, let's hope not. A Siena poll released Monday showed New Yorkers strongly back Cuomo. Nearly three-quarters support his budget, with Republicans more supportive than Democrats and upstaters more supportive than New York City voters.

Yet Nozzolio, who hails from the heart of upstate, insists that "many members of our Senate Republican majority do not believe this (Cuomo's prison closure plan) is the appropriate path that should be taken." Whether that's a threat to hold up passage of the budget remains unclear. But it's obvious that Nozzolio and his GOP colleagues aren't willing to give Cuomo's decision-making process the chance to work that it deserves. Cuomo is also making \$100 million available for communities hard-hit by the closures.

With the state's prison population down from 71,600 in 1999 to less than 56,300 currently, it makes sense that Cuomo wants to take 3,500 prison beds out of minimum- and medium-security prisons. To make that happen, he's formed a task force to recommend actions such as closures and consolidations. The panel will begin work after the April 1 required passage of the budget.

For a change, stakeholders such as state lawmakers, and labor and corrections experts, will get a say-so. In the past, the governor and legislative leaders made such calls behind closed doors.

With 41 percent of the 16-member task force made up of lawmakers, Nozzolio's complaint that the process represents an end-run around the Legislature seems ill-founded. Cuomo's strategy is worth trying.

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