

New York trying to sell vacant prisons

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ALBANY In May, New York state will try — for the second time — to sell 31 acres with 38 buildings including a gymnasium and a chapel, as well as on-site water and sewage-treatment systems.

Starting bid: \$90,000, a relative steal compared to the previous price of \$390,000.

The catch: It's a former prison, surrounded by rural land.

At 11 locations across the state, New York is trying to sell vacant prisons and juvenile-justice facilities that have closed over the past two years as part of budget cutbacks and consolidations.

The empty properties contain hundreds of vacant structures built upon thousands of vacant acres of land with sought-after amenities like central water and sewer systems and natural gas lines. But they also carry something of a stigma because of their former use.

The state has shut down 11 correctional facilities and 28 juvenile centers since 2009, and a decision to shutter another two this year — including the Beacon Correctional Facility in Dutchess County — has again brought up a question that's proven difficult to answer.

Is anyone in the market for an old prison? The state is trying, but so far, there aren't many takers.

“(Empire State Development) is working with a number of other state agencies to find ways to save taxpayers money and transform costly, underutilized facilities into opportunities that will create jobs or better serve the community,” said Cassie Harvey, a spokeswoman for Empire State Development, the state's economic-development arm. “Our efforts to redevelop these facilities are moving forward positively, with many in the process of sale or transfer.”

The state is on the verge of making its first prison sale. The Mid-Orange Correctional Facility in Warwick, Orange County, is in the process of being sold for \$3.1 million to a public-benefit corporation controlled by the town. The deal is awaiting approval from the state Comptroller's Office.

“We looked at it as an opportunity, and we embarked on getting control of it,” said Warwick Town Supervisor Michael Sweeten, who saw the state close the facility in 2011.

The closed prisons hit most corners of the state, including three in the North Country, one each on Staten Island and in Manhattan and the rest spread across upstate. Some, such as the minimum-security facility in Butler, Wayne County, aren't on the market because there is still a separate prison on the same plot of land.

In most cases, the state has marketed the vacant sites as an economic-development opportunity.

A deal was approved by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration last September with the Franklin County Industrial Development Agency-- with the help of a \$2 million state grant — to turn the local

Tryon Boys and Girls Center into a business park. That deal also awaits approval from the comptroller and state attorney general.

As part of this year's state budget, the Fulton Correctional Facility in the Bronx will soon be transferred to a non-profit that will use it as a place to reentry center for parolees.

Some properties have proven to be a tough sell, however. Camp Georgetown in Madison County — the facility that will again go up for auction in May — has been hampered by its remote location, drawing no bidders when the state put it up for auction on Sept. 11 with the \$390,000 minimum bid. Camp Gabriels, near Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks, has twice been put up for auction with no bidders.

In other cases, unique circumstances have kept facilities off the market. The former Camp Pharsalia in Chenango County, for example, sits upon land that was purchased through a bond act in 1950s and sits at the edge of a forest preserve, with state law complicating a potential sale.

In a town like Pharsalia — population 593 — closing the minimum-security prison dealt a blow to the local economy.

At the same time, the prison population has declined precipitously over the past decade as the state has clawed back its tough drug laws and emphasized programs that transition low-risk prisoners to the streets sooner. Since 1999, the state's prison population has dropped from 71,600 to its current level of about 55,000 inmates.

"It's been tough, but we've survived, too," Pharsalia Supervisor Dennis Brown said. "You try to understand; I wouldn't want the job that (the state) has to do and decide which prisons stay open. If we don't need these prisons, we don't need these prisons."

Donn Rowe, president of the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association, said closing the prisons has led to the state "squeezing more inmates into smaller spaces." Many of the union's members have been forced into lengthy commutes or have taken up second residences as a result of the closures, he said.

"As far as the impact locally, it leaves great voids in communities," Rowe said. "Our members are neighbors, coaches, volunteers and so on and so forth." Cuomo, however, has pushed back against the argument that economic impacts should be determinative when weighing whether to close prisons. In his first State of the State address in January 2011, Cuomo said prisons are "not an employment program."

And his administration has touted the budget savings from closing the facilities. The Beacon prison, for example, will save \$19 million, according to Cuomo's office. The juvenile facility closures and reductions have saved \$50.9 million since 2009, according to the Office of Children and Family Services.

"If people need jobs, let's get people jobs. Don't put other people in prison to give some people jobs," Cuomo said in 2011 as he pushed prison closures for the first time in 2011. "Don't put other people in juvenile justice facilities to give some people jobs. That's not what this state is all about."

In Camp Pharsalia's case, some local officials have pushed creativity in trying to find a new use for the facility. In 2011, a Chenango County task force suggested the Department of Environmental Conservation — which controls the land — use it as a test site for high-volume hydraulic fracturing, the much-debate method used for drawing natural gas from shale formations. Brown rejected the idea. “We don't want to be anybody's guinea pig,” he said.

The Mid-Orange prison, meanwhile, is expected to be split and the Warwick public-benefit corporation will subdivide the lot and try to lease or sell individual plots to developers. About 150 acres of the 700-acre site will be sold for \$3.1 million, with another 150 acres transferred to the town for \$1 and a requirement that it be designated for “public use.” The remaining acreage is wetlands and not able to be developed, Sweeten said.

“We don't believe this has ever been done in this fashion before,” said Sweeten. “So we're crafting some new ground, and there's a learning curve there for both us and the (state) agencies.” Still, the pace of prison sales has some in the mid-Hudson Valley concerned. Under the state budget passed that took effect April 1, Cuomo's administration can close the Beacon Correctional Facility — the state's last female, minimum-security prison — with 60 days notice.

“(Beacon has) come a huge way, and this parcel of land is right in the middle of this city. It's critical that we find a way to reuse it so that we not only create the amount of jobs that we lost with the closing of the facility, but ideally we create many, many more,” said Sen. Terry Gipson, D-Rhinebeck, Dutchess County.

Assemblyman Frank Skartados, D-Milton, Ulster County, said he's concerned about the impact on the local community when the Beacon prison closes. “It was a minimum-correctional facility,” Skartados said. He said he's hopeful that the facility can be redeveloped.