

Prisons get new big-screen deal

State OKs movie contract to counter prisoner boredom

By Rick Karlin

Updated 10:48 pm, Monday, August 25, 2014

Albany Times Union

During the last legislative session, lawmakers said no to a proposal that would have permitted prison inmates to get a free college education while behind bars. But for more than two decades, New York state has been paying to show feature films to prison inmates.

This month, state Comptroller Tom DiNapoli signed off on the latest contract with St. Louis-based Swank Motion Pictures for approximately \$894,000. The contract through March 31, 2019 lets the prison system license feature films that can be viewed by eligible prison inmates.

The previous contract, for approximately \$1 million, ran from 2009 to this year.

The renewal was free of comment by lawmakers, many of whom are busy running for re-election in their home districts.

But barely six months ago, a plan proposed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to allocate \$1 million a year to let inmates earn college degrees sparked a political firestorm.

While the idea was to reduce rates of recidivism among convicts after their release, lawmakers said they didn't want taxpayer dollars being used to educate inmates. Some said their constituents were struggling to pay tuition for their kids and they were loath to offer free schooling for prisoners.

"I understand the sentiment," Cuomo said when he dropped the proposal from the 2014-15 state budget.

"I don't agree with it, but I understand it, and I understand the appearance of it," he added.

The backlash included online petitions such as one dubbed "Hell No to Attica University" from Hudson Valley Republican Sen. Greg Ball, and "Say 'No' to Free College for Prisoners" by fellow GOP Sen. Mark Grisanti of Buffalo.

Grisanti and Ball did not return calls for comment on the prison movies.

The contract with Swank, which is the name of the family that started the service, is for licensing rights to show feature films in venues like prisons.

Swank also licenses films that are shown in SUNY campuses, including New Paltz and Potsdam.

State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision spokesman Tom Mailey said in an email that the licensing costs are approximately \$4.10 per inmate per year.

Eligible inmates then pay a fee on their own to watch the movies, which are shown in communal spaces.

The idea, said Mailey, is "reduce idleness and decrease the opportunities for unrest."

"It's an accepted industry practice to fight idleness," said GOP Sen. Pat Gallivan, a former Erie County sheriff who chairs the Senate Corrections Committee. "Is that an acceptable cost to combat idleness and restlessness? I would accept that it is."

Lawmakers have likewise supported the limited use of cable TV in some prisons to help fight the boredom that prison guards say could, if ignored, lead to disruptions and violence.

Last year almost 43,000 inmates in 52 facilities viewed the movies. Film titles include "War Horse," "Sherlock Holmes," "Mission Impossible," and "The Muppets."

No "X-rated" films are allowed, and films that are shown must be approved by the superintendent of each facility.