

State lawmaker wants hearings on prison privatization

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The chairman of a Senate budget subcommittee said today he wants to hold hearings next month on the personnel costs of privatizing Florida prisons in South Florida, saying the possible \$25 million cost of employee turnover was hidden from state lawmakers during the 2011 legislative session.

But the head of the full appropriations committee denied there was any politically driven effort to ram the privatization through without analysis of its cost. He said he's not sure if a subcommittee under his budget panel needs to look into the matter.

The new state budget mandates privatization of prisons in Department of Corrections Region IV, an 18-county area with about 30 major institutions and about 3,800 employees. Those employees have "bumping" rights and can use their seniority to keep their jobs, possibly moving to institutions in other parts of the state.

DOC Deputy Secretary Daniel Ronay sent an email on May 13 to Bonnie Rogers, a criminal-justice budget aide in the governor's office, saying the potential cost of accrued vacation time, sick leave and compensatory time off for employees losing their jobs could be \$25 million. Ronay said the Legislature was made aware of this but did not address it, and "this payout may just cripple the agency" for the current fiscal year.

Rogers replied that "we, too, have concerns with how this will be managed."

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, said his criminal-justice subcommittee would hold hearings on the privatization cost when the Senate begins committee work next month. Fasano opposed the privatization move during the session but it was adopted by the full Senate Budget Committee.

Sen. JD Alexander, R-Lake Wales, who chairs the full appropriations panel, said the 18-county privatization would be cheaper in the long run. He said an initial payout of \$25 million for accrued leave was offset by operational savings in the future.

"Unfortunately, the private-prison issue was pushed down everyone's throats during the session and done very quietly and behind the scenes," said Fasano. "There were never any public hearings."

When interim committee meetings begin next month, Fasano said he wants to ask DOC officials how they plan to handle the cost. The department can apply to the joint Legislative Budget Committee to move money within the budget, but Fasano said such a big issue should have been heard by the full House and Senate.

Alexander said Fasano's opposition to privatization was well-known.

“He has an opinion, I have a different one,” said Alexander. “We’ll examine the facts but whether we need to have subcommittee hearings or not is something we’ll determine when we get up there next month.”