

Sat, 08 Mar 2008

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**New plans proposed for Paris Work Camp**

Written by Gary Henry  
Fri, 07 Mar 2008

A new approach for utilizing the Ed Jenison Work Camp is underway. A bill sponsored by Rep. Roger Eddy (R-Hutsonville) to give control of the former prison to the City of Paris unanimously cleared the Illinois House Executive Committee earlier this week and now awaits further consideration on the House floor.

"I'll lobby House members, obviously," Eddy promised.

The bill creates special legislation to provide the city with a quit claim deed to the prison, but there is a catch. The city must use the property for a public purpose.

"If it ceases to be used for a public purpose, it reverts back to the state," Eddy said about the language in the bill.

Paris Mayor Craig Smith envisions an adult education campus at the work camp site. He said the University of Illinois, Eastern Illinois University, Lake Land College, Indiana State University and Indiana University at Bloomington are interested in the project.

"These universities are interested in offering classes here, but they don't want to be responsible for a facility," said Smith.

He added conversations with the U of I have included the possibility of placing an extension office on the campus and using some of the 20-acre site for test plots.

"I think this would be a tremendous asset for the city and the county," said Smith.

According to Smith, an adult education campus would help area residents obtain the necessary classes for improving their job skills. He said people now work all day and still face a long commute if they want to take a class.

"This way they could go home, have supper and within five minutes drive to class," said Smith.

The unused work camp has galled local leaders since former Gov. George Ryan closed the facility in 2002.

Both Eddy and Smith stressed the Department of Corrections will not bring the work camp back into service.

"There are no plans to reopen it," said Eddy. "Governor Blagojevich has line-item vetoed it out of the budget for two years."

In 2007, the state put the work camp on the auction block for \$1.3 million, but no bidders came forward.

Eddy and Smith said the failure to sell the property may help in the argument for transferring it to the city.

Smith explained the state's Central Management Service lacks the authority to give away state property but it can be done through special legislation and that is where Eddy and Senator Dale Righter (R-Mattoon) enter the plan.

Eddy expressed "cautious optimism" the bill will make it through the House.

"I don't know of any opposition," said Eddy. "The state has done this before. We are not blazing a new trail."

He also acknowledged anything can happen in the legislature and just because a bill comes out of committee does not mean it will pass the House, be approved in the Senate, survive a joint committee, obtain final passage and then face the biggest obstacle – an unpredictable executive branch.

"We have included the governor's office in the discussions," said Eddy. "I think the argument needs to be made to the governor that it costs the state to keep this building empty."

According to Eddy, the state pays at least \$50,000 yearly in maintenance for a property



that is not used. An expense, he said, that will disappear if the property is transferred to Paris.

Smith said it makes sense to give the site to Paris because the city has already made a large investment through road, water and sewage infrastructure at to benefit the state's construction of the work camp.

"We're very hopeful it's going to happen," Smith said about the city's acquisition of the property.

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