

Prison wing may reopen

Corrections officials weighing use of facility at Warm Springs to ease overcrowding dilemm

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State Corrections officials are considering re-opening a mothballed temporary prison near the state mental hospital in Warm Springs to deal with prison overcrowding.

Prison officials announced in August the state's prisons were filling up and backing into county jails, thanks to a methamphetamine-fueled spike in felons sentenced to hard time.

At the time, officials said they had little choice but to consider sending Montana inmates out of state.

But that was before Hurricane Katrina, which displaced tens of thousands of inmates in the Gulf Coast, putting available prison cells nationwide in short supply.

Now, said Bob Anez, spokesman for the Department of Corrections, Montana is thinking of keeping state inmates closer to home while dealing with another problem at Montana State Prison: the high number of inmates sent back to Deer Lodge because they fail to follow the rules of their probation.

Right now, the idea is still in its early stages. Corrections officials are meeting with Gov. Brian Schweitzer's staff today to get his thoughts on the plan. A final decision is expected by the end of the week.

Corrections officials are considering opening an 80-cell, so-called "revocation center" on the campus of the Montana State Mental Hospital in Warm Springs. The center would be run by Community Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., a non-profit Butte corrections contracting company.

The center would be for probationers who do not follow the probation rules — violations that could land them behind bars for the remainder of their sentences. "This would be a pilot project to see if something like this may be a permanent part of the corrections system as a cheaper and, maybe more effective alternative, than just sending them right back to prison," Anez said.

If the idea works, the department would consider building a permanent revocation center and asking businesses around the state to submit bids to run it.

The revocation center would look and feel like prison, but inmates would only spend between 30 and 60 days there, long enough to let them know what life be like if they continue to violate the terms of their probation.

"It'll give them something to think about," Anez said. "If they foul up there, they go to prison." The building was once used as overflow for the Montana State Prison, said Jerome McCarthy, captain in charge of the Butte-Silver Bow City County Detention Center. Butte-Silver Bow — and for a time, Anaconda-Deer Lodge — used the building as a county jail between 1999 and 2004, after inmates set fire to the original Butte-Silver Bow jail. The Warm Springs building now sits empty, but McCarthy said but it worked great as a county jail and has all the trappings of a prison — more than enough to give errant probationers a taste of life behind bars.

"It has the old bars," he said. "It's definitely what you'd envision an older jail to be." Anez said it would probably cost about \$300,000 to get the building ready to use again. He anticipated the facility could be open in up to 60 days.

"This would be an emergency pilot project," Anez said.