

State suspends plan for prison

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HELENA — The Montana Department of Corrections on Friday retracted its request for bids to build a new 120-bed medium security prison — just a week after originally saying the new multimillion dollar project was needed.

The agency said it decided to suspend the plans for a privately run correctional facility in order to better assess population trends.

Last week, the agency unveiled its request for proposals asking companies to submit bids to build and operate a new facility. Corrections officials said at the time the new facility was specifically needed for inmates requiring assisted living help, very young adult inmates, and general medium security inmates.

But director Mike Ferriter said the proposal is being suspended for up to 90 days as the agency re-evaluates its needs. He said the agency's focus on helping inmates return to society is expected to reduce the recidivism rate.

"We are taking some additional time to observe fluctuating population figures and determine what effect they have on our future incarceration needs," he said.

Ferriter said he made the decision after consulting with the office of Gov. Brian Schweitzer. The news was released late Friday.

Schweitzer has been travelling this week in China and couldn't be reached for comment, his office staff said.

The retracted proposal called for finding a contractor to house the inmates at either a new or existing building. The Legislature last year authorized about \$3 million to develop the facility.

Three private Montana prison operators and three local governments previously expressed interest in providing the beds, including the vacant 464-bed Two Rivers Authority prison in Hardin.

The state had originally said in its 74-page bid request that it hoped to award the 30-year contract by late April.

Ferriter said the plan will be re-evaluated. It may not be issued at all.

"We feel like we should be thoughtful on a decision like this when we are spending taxpayer dollars. There is significant money involved," Ferriter said.