

Correcting the Record on the Whittier Prison Proposal, HB 55

By Representative Mike Hawker

Recent testimony before the Senate State Affairs Committee regarding the proposed correctional facility at Whittier compels me to set the record straight. The need for additional correctional facility space in Alaska is virtually uncontested. Existing facilities operate near maximum inmate capacity, and we warehouse nearly 700 inmates in a privately operated prison in Arizona. We have poured over 100 million dollars into the Arizona economy in the past eight years, funding hundreds of Arizona jobs and supporting a corporation that doesn't even do business in Alaska.

I have sponsored House Bill 55 ([HB 55](#)), which authorizes the Department of Corrections to enter into a contractual agreement with the City of Whittier to secure needed correctional facility space and services. The City of Whittier must construct the facility and secure a commitment to operate it from a qualified third-party contractor in a competitive bid process. The facility must provide at least 1,200 beds. HB 55 also requires the operator to provide culturally relevant reformation services to incarcerated Alaska natives, who make up nearly 40 percent of Alaska's inmate population.

There is little question that the best public policy is to manage our prison population in state with a commitment to combating the tragic cycle of recidivism. Family contact and community identification is imperative to reforming offenders. At issue is whether the solution contemplated in HB 55 or an equivalent facility built and operated by the State is the most cost effective.

Testifying before the Senate State Affairs Committee, Department of Corrections Commissioner Marc Antrim repeatedly affirmed a commitment to pursuing the least-cost alternative while identifying the HB 55 proposal as the most costly. Unfortunately, Mr. Antrim did not verify his cost figures for HB 55 before testifying. In fact, he never discussed HB 55 with its sponsors other than to express his personal preference for increasing government owned and operated facilities.

Mr. Antrim materially misrepresented the actual cost of the correctional facility solution being proposed in HB 55. The cost of correctional facilities is traditionally presented in terms of dollars per inmate per day. Mr. Antrim told the committee a State owned and operated facility would cost \$110.39 per day while the facility contemplated in HB 55 would cost \$127.25 per day. In fact, the correct cost for the facility proposed in HB 55 is only \$91 to \$94 per day.

Mr. Antrim erred by adding the State's daily cost of inmate programs, health care and administrative overhead to the base contract cost specified in HB 55. HB 55 already includes those items as a component of the base cost. This unfortunate mistake could have been avoided had he discussed HB 55 with its sponsor before testifying.

I also note that the correctional facility supported by Mr. Antrim increases the number of prisoners per guard from the current state average of approximately 4 to 1 up to 6 to 1. If the State were to authorize a 6 to 1 ratio for the HB 55 proposed facility, the daily costs could be further reduced by approximately five dollars per inmate. The appropriate comparative cost figures would be \$110 per day for a State facility against less than \$90 per day for the Whittier facility. This difference calculates to a potential annual cost savings from the HB 55 proposal of approximately \$8,700,000 per year. In these times of fiscal austerity, the HB 55 proposal needs to be fairly considered.

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Representative Mike Hawker is a Republican representing District 32, The Chugach Park District, in Southcentral Alaska. His district includes the City of Whittier, which supports the HB55 proposal.