Lock the door on for-profit prison plan

BY CHRIS DORNIN

A long-awaited study on privatizing the New Hampshire prison system was due, and then overdue, on Oct. 15. Officials now hope to see a report by mid-November from the consulting firm MGT Associates on the merits of four competing offers to build and operate a for-profit, co-ed prison or rent it back to the state.

If one of the vendors wins a contract for maybe two decades of services in the $3 billion range, this state would be the first to substantially privatize its corrections system. That would be a tragic mistake.

Gov. John Lynch vowed to withhold approving the consultation report during a recent meeting with opponents of privatization. Officials would present their own version instead, based in part on the secret advice of the MGT consulting firm.

I’d like to read that report by outside experts, led by George Vose, the former commissioner of corrections for Massachusetts and Rhode Island. There is reason to fear it will slant in favor of the private prison industry, since Vose sits on the board of one of the worst prison vendors, Community Education Centers.

The company manages 5,000 halfway house offenders at any given time in New Jersey and allowed an astonishing 452 escapes in 2011. The New York Times published a recent expose on CEC as a crowded, violent gulag that profits from warehousing people with unmet constitutional rights.

The Times said most inmates test positive for substance abuse, and most officers are untrained, overworked, underpaid, inexperi-enced short-timers. I spoke with Vose this summer, and he downplayed his clout at Community Education Centers and in New Hampshire corrections.

“We’re not being asked to evaluate if prison privatization would be good policy for New Hampshire,” he explained. “We’re not a political advocacy group for anybody. Our role is to evaluate proposals based on specific criteria. And I’m only one member of a team with five people on this project.”

Vose was vice president of operations at the for-profit prison vendor CivGenics from 2002 to 2009, which agreed to pay $3.4 million in overcharges to Massachusetts in 2007.

Under Vose, CivGenics compiled its own record of warehousing not unlike the company it merged with – yes, it was Community Education Centers.

The bidders seeking to take over most of the New Hampshire prison system include the GEO Group, Management & Training Corp., Corrections Corporation of America and the New Hampshire Hunt Justice Group. According to the New Hampshire Union Leader, they had spent $130,000 in this state on lobbyists as of mid-August.

Widespread accounts from around the country suggest these players would bring their own set of baggage. Rigorous studies show for-profit prisons are no cheaper than public prisons, and often more expensive, when you count all the hidden costs.

Lynch could lawfully nuke a 20-year prison takeover contract to the lame-dude executive councilors before he leaves in January. I hope not. They would be handing a mess to the November election winners. Gabriatalor candidates Ovide Lamontagne and Maggie Hassan are on record opposing private prisons.

Lynch has worked for a better idea – downsizing prisons and using the savings for community corrections. That strategy has cut budgets, crime and recidivism rates in a number of states, according to the National Association of the States.

Lynch knows lawmakers would never bond $300 million to build a state-owned co-ed prison, but they might OK $50 million for a women’s prison.

New Hampshire Legal Assistance has filed a very winnable class-action lawsuit against the women’s prison, and the courts in due time will order the state to rehabilitate women aggressively.

Why wait until then? Why bind Lamontagne or Hassan to a flawed lame-dude policy of for-profit prisons they would both have a mandate to veto? Let the state build a women’s prison. And own it.

Chris Dornin is a retired State House reporter and a prison reform advocate.

Reducing national debt should be a top priority

BY RICHARD SWETT

By now, voters have probably heard their fill of what grave problems face the country, as every interest group under the sun wants to insert itself into the political debate.

But amidst all the issues on voters’ minds, there is one that should overshadow all others: our bloated national debt.

In recent years, well-intentioned but careless policies have left us severely overstretched. Left unaddressed, our debt will continue to grow, which could push the country back into recession.

Today, our national debt weighs in at more than $16 trillion. The publicly held portion of our debt – the metric economists find most useful – represents more than 70 percent of GDP.

Allowed to continue on the same path, it likely will exceed the size of the economy in a decade. Such sizable levels of debt aren’t sustainable. As they grow, investments will shrink, the U.S. will become less competitive and overall economic growth will fall off.

The problem is immediate and long-term. The most pressing matter is a rapidly approaching “fiscal cliff” – an appropriate term for billions of dollars of spending cuts and tax increases set to kick in Jan 1.

The deadline was scrapped altogether last year in talks to address the U.S. debt ceiling, and while going over the fiscal cliff would initially reduce the deficit, experts collectively agree that it would cause the economy to shrink by 3.9 percent annually in the first quarter of 2013. This is not the kind of deficit reduction we need.

A quick fix won’t be enough to solve the root problem; we have to address the sickness, not just the symptoms.

Through targeted tax reforms and thoughtful spending cuts, lawmakers will have to put the now-escalating debt on a gradual downward as a share of the economy.

In order to enact the kind of balanced approach we need to secure real, long-term fiscal stability, leaders will have to work together, make compromises and set aside ideology for the larger good.

The dangers of failing to act aren’t just a bunch of hypothetical what-ifs. Already, uncertainty stirred by speculation of whether Congress will be able to avert the fiscal cliff is deterring companies from hiring.

And Moody’s Investor Services has threatened to downgrade our country’s credit rating if we don’t avoid the cliff and implement long-term deficit reduction.

As the president and CEO of Climate Prosperity Enterprise Solutions, I understand that kicking the can is not a business solution.

We cannot afford to ignore the debt any longer.

Instead, we’ll need to generate greater tax revenue and tactically cut unnecessary spending. Important public programs will have to be improved to operate more efficiently.

There very well may not be a perfect solution to get all that done. It will take teamwork to find middle ground, combine ideas and not let perfection stand in the way of good solutions.

Already, individuals from all walks of life have mobilized to advocate meaningful change.

Recently, the Campaign to Fix the Debt – a coalition of business executives, public leaders, academics and everyday Americans – launched efforts to urge Congress and the White House to act, and act now.

I urge you, and all those across New Hampshire concerned about the future of our economy and our country, to join the movement by signing the petition at FixTheDebt.org.

As a country, we tackle our problems collectively. It’s what makes the American spirit strong.

Together we can, and must, tackle our debt while it’s still in our power to do so.
