

Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Marion open for privatized-prison business

Officials of jobs-starved Marion back Kasich's plan to privatize 2 facilities

By Alan Johnson

http://www.dispatchpolitics.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2011/03/29/copy/marion-open-for-privatized-prison-business.html?adsec=politics&sid=101

MARION, Ohio - A who's-who of Marion business and political leaders gave an enthusiastic thumbs up to Gov. John Kasich's plan to sell two state prisons to private operators.

For them, privatization is a four-letter word: J-O-B-S.

Mayor Scott Schertzer said a community starved for economic development after repeated setbacks in recent years welcomes a private company offering prison jobs to local residents.

"Not once can I remember a situation where we said, 'Not in my backyard,'" Schertzer said yesterday at a standing-room-only gathering orchestrated by the governor's office at the closed Marion Juvenile Correctional Facility.

"Marion County is open for business," county Commissioner Ken Stiverson chimed in. "Our arms are open for other public-private partnerships."

Kasich touted his plan to sell five state prisons, including the juvenile facility and another prison in Marion, as "good news for this community."

"Ohio must get used to change if we are to survive," he said.

Under Kasich's proposal, which needs the legislature's approval, the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction would reap \$50 million to \$200 million from the sales. The agency then would contract with the buyers to house prisoners, as it does now with two state-owned, privately operated prisons.

The juvenile facility, which closed in 2009, would house an estimated 480 inmates and require 60 staff members in the private operation, prisons spokesman Carlo LoParo said. Also up for sale would be the North Central Correctional Institution next to the juvenile facility. North Central houses about 2,300 inmates and has a staff of 434, including 280 corrections officers.

Kasich said he doesn't understand the fear of privatization. "I see no sacrifice in privatization," he said. "We should not look at this as a sacrifice. We should look at it as the sun coming up."

Tracy Cutright, a correction officer and Ohio Civil Service Employees Association official, said current state employees will sacrifice by transitioning to private-prison jobs that pay less and have reduced benefits.

Cutright said that increased tax revenue from private prisons would benefit the city, county and schools, but that workers will suffer. "The salaries won't be the kind of salaries that Marion County is used to," he said. People will have to cut back to make ends meet, he said.

A state prison in Grafton, plus the two privately operated prisons, also would be sold to the highest and best bidder under the Kasich administration's plan.

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