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Gov. Snyder's proposed budget has host of public safety implications for Jackson County

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By Danielle Salisbury | Jackson Citizen Patriot

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The governor's proposed budget, released last week, has a host of public safety implications for Jackson County with the call for the closure of Michigan State Police posts, one prison and the reduction of the number of trial judgeships.

Gov. Rick Snyder's plan does not specify what prison facilities, state police posts or trial judgeships would be targeted.

"There is plenty of work to do in Jackson County without eliminating police officers," Undersheriff Tom Finco said of the possibility the Jackson state police post on Cooper Street would close. Finco, a retired post commander, however, said it seems unlikely the state will shutter the post at least in part because of its proximity to I-94, U.S. 127, and the county's four prisons.

The state police post in Jackson handles about 5,000 complaints a year, Finco said, noting it was early to be expressing concerns about a loss.

State police director of public affairs, Shanon Banner said it's too early to know which of the 62 work sites could be eliminated.

"We don't have a solid timeline for this but the decision is likely months down the road," she said.

Reducing the number of posts would save \$3.2 million, according to the proposal.

The plan also suggests closing a prison by the end of the 2011 fiscal year would save \$18.9 million. Despite cuts, Snyder proposes a slight increase in the corrections budget for the next two years.

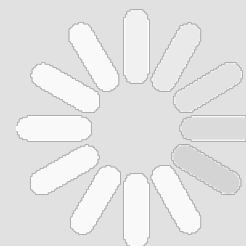
The state Department of Corrections closed several prison facilities under Jennifer Granholm. Southern Michigan Correctional Facility in Blackman Township closed in 2007.

Russ Marlan, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, said there are a couple of factors that might mean Jackson prisons are not likely targets.

One is them is a \$17.3 million grant from the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth announced earlier this week. That will be divided between the Parnall and Cotton correctional facilities to increase the efficiency of the prisons.

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Those improvements include the use of more energy-efficient lighting and decreasing water consumption to avoid a large water rate increase imposed by the city.

Marlan said that investment would be "strongly considered" in favor of keeping the prisons open.

The other factor is the size of the prisons. The Parnall Correctional Facility has almost 1,700 inmates and the G. Robert Cotton Correctional Facility houses around 1,800. Marlan said because those prisons are large with a higher number of inmates, it is unlikely there would be a population drop large enough to warrant the closure of either.

The Cooper Street Correctional Facility and the Charles Egeler Reception and Guidance Center are also in Jackson County.

The proposal stated that in the next few months, enough inmates will have been paroled through the Michigan Prisoner Re-entry Initiative to allow for a closure. MPRI was started in 2005, and has since helped 35,000 parolees find housing a jobs, according to the Department of Corrections. From the program's inception to Mid-May 2010, recidivism rates have decreased 33 percent, the report said.

Marlan said the program becomes more established every year, which is partly why there has been a "slow and incremental decrease" in the state prison population.

"The population has dropped and continues to drop by 30 inmates per week," said Marlan, which is why prisons have been able to close.

But county law enforcement officials are concerned that the gradual increase in parolees puts a strain on local jails and police.

"Lots of people are being released prematurely and some of them are at the expense of public safety," said Jackson County Sheriff Dan Heyns, "Some of (the parolees) still represent a threat."

Snyder's proposal did not suggest changing the parole process, but stated that there are 8,000 inmates in Michigan that have completed their minimum sentences and are eligible for parole.

Another cut expected to save the state money is a reduction of the number of parole board members from 15 to 10.

The parole board currently has 14 members because one retired late last year.

Marlan estimated yearly savings of \$750,000 by eliminating the five positions.

Snyder also has proposed eliminating six unspecified trial court judgeships.

This is of particular interest to Jackson County because authorities have speculated the governor would not fill a vacancy created if Jackson County District Judge James Justin were removed from the bench.


Justin, a judge since 1977, has been suspended since July. The Michigan Judicial Tenure Commission has filed a complaint against him, alleging several forms of misconduct. Any possible discipline, which could include removal, ultimately will be decided by the state Supreme Court.


Meanwhile, the three remaining local District judges continue to do the work of four judges.

"We are busier. There is no question about it," said District Judge Joseph Filip.

He said he hopes the state will retain the four positions. The state Legislature establishes and abolishes positions; the governor appoints judges to fill vacancies.

A reduction of six judges is not very many, said Filip, who has heard talk of a larger number.





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There are 585 full-time trial court judgeships in Michigan and the number can be reduced over the next two decades without degrading the quality of court services, according to a report released in January by the Judicial Crossroads Task Force.

The task force is made up of judges and attorneys and is charged with identifying how the justice system can meet the public need while operating within the constraints of the state's changing economy.

Chief District Judge R. Darryl Mazur said the results of a study into the work Michigan judges do and how they spend their time is pending. For four weeks last fall, every judge had to log his daily activities, Mazur said.

Earlier studies showed there was enough work in Jackson County District Court for about 4.3 judges, he said.

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SaxonWarrior

February 21, 2011 at 3:30PM

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I'm not saying that I agree with closing more prisons but if the state decides to close more, they need to CLOSE them. My understanding is that the prison that was "closed" on Cooper street is still costing money to maintain. That is, it is at least partially heated, etc. It needs to completely shut down and moth balled so that it is zero drain on the state budget and my taxpayer's pocketbook!

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