

West Carthage Mayor Sees Closed Watertown Prison as Opportunity for Emergency Housing

By JULIE ABBASS



The Watertown Correctional Facility, also referred to locally as the Dry Hill prison, which was closed on March 31, 2021, has been suggested by West Carthage Mayor Scott M. Burto as a site for emergency housing. Kara Dry/Watertown Daily Times

WEST CARTHAGE — West Carthage Mayor Scott M. Burto sent a letter to state officials Friday suggesting the former Dry Hill prison — also known as the Watertown Correctional Facility — be used to house the homeless and other “emergency housing” users in Jefferson and Lewis counties.

In his letter sent via email to Empire State Development President and CEO Hope Knight and Ford Foundation President Darren Walker, Mr. Burto urged the co-chairs of the newly formed Prison Redevelopment Commission to consider “the wonderful opportunity the state has partnering with the local community.”

Gov. Kathleen C. Hochul named the 15-member commission in May. The group of state department heads, economic developers and real estate professionals is tasked with analyzing prison redevelopment opportunities “to best connect our industry and workforce goals with action plans that will both save taxpayer money and bring these buildings to new life as economic engines,” the governor said in announcing the commission.

Mr. Burto said Jefferson County is “struggling with opportunities for emergency placements” in safe housing, noting that two of the hotels and an apartment building normally used for the purpose are unusable either because of fires or being condemned.

He also said Lewis County is having the same housing problem, which he believes could be remedied by repurposing the former prison.

After a similar hotel in Cayuga County was condemned and a registered sex offender was placed at the Pleasant Night Inn on Route 26 in West Carthage — one of the few hotels in the area approved by the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision — the mayor said the department could also make use of Dry Hill for parolees in need of temporary housing.

“I believe there is a real opportunity there for a regional facility,” Mr. Burto said in an interview on Wednesday.

To broaden the appeal of his proposed “dorm/apartment style emergency housing complex,” Mr. Burto also suggested that county mental health and substance abuse treatment centers could be established on site to help provide easy access to services.

He also suggested a regular stop could be included in an existing Watertown city bus route using the county’s Federal Highway Administration funding, thereby allowing residents who most often do not have access to private vehicles, “to access stores, medical appointments and local parks.”

Mr. Burto said in the letter that key partnerships with the Jefferson-Lewis Board of Cooperative Educational Services and Jefferson Community College could provide workforce training or adult education classes to empower facility residents to find work opportunities.

He said in the interview that he thinks the effort would be the most financially effective if Jefferson County either bought the building itself or formed a partnership with a nonprofit to save the county money.

“They (at the Jefferson County Department of Social Services) are spending probably \$40,000 to \$60,000 a month for emergency housing,” Mr. Burto said. “I do not know what it would cost (to convert the building to

apartments or rooms) but I know that if the state is willing to form a commission and possibly put some funding behind the redevelopment of these facilities to put them back into public use, that it would create the opportunity to have that discussion.”

Although he has not received a response from either commissioner or representatives of Jefferson County, Mr. Burto said he is hopeful that it is the right idea at the right time.

“I thought the timing was right — the governor just appointed this commission ... so I thought the timing was right to send the commission a letter and say, ‘Hey, here’s a great reuse for a public opportunity that’s needed right now. It is the opportunity we need for assistance,’” he said.

The 71-acre Watertown facility at 22951/3147 Swan Road was closed in March 2021. The campus consists of 90 buildings — 51 inside the prison compound and 39 outside. The facility was originally built as a U.S. Air Force facility and was converted into a prison in 1982.