

Budget includes money to keep Mount McGregor Correctional Facility open State would have to give year notice of any future closures

By MAURY THOMPSON

WILTON -- State budget bills being passed by the Legislature this week include \$6 million to keep the minimum-security camp at Mount McGregor Correctional Facility open for another year, along with provisions that would reduce the likelihood the camp would become a target for closure again, state Assemblyman Roy McDonald announced Tuesday.

The bills, which the Assembly and Senate began voting on Tuesday, establish a new policy that the state Department of Correctional Services would be required to announce proposed closures of correctional facilities one year in advance, said McDonald, R-Wilton.

The department would also be required to complete an analysis of re-employment opportunities in the same geographic region for affected employees, and an analysis of the economic impact on the community, as well as a plan to reuse the facility, McDonald said.

"They (employees) don't have to worry about the program evaporating overnight," he said.

Gov. George Pataki's original budget proposal called for closing the minimum security camp within 90 days from when the state budget was adopted.

The minimum security camp employs 84 people and houses 300 inmates, according to a state Department of Correctional Services report. The medium-security prison portion of Mount McGregor, which houses nearly 600 inmates, was not part of the proposed closure.

Pataki could still veto the funding and provisions that legislators are expected to approve this week, but McDonald said he thought the funding was secure.

"I don't believe that he is going to veto this," he said.

Pataki also proposed closing the camp last year, and area legislators lobbied to keep it open.

The new provisions will reduce the likelihood of the camp becoming a perennial issue in state budget negotiations, McDonald said.

"I think it's a major victory," he said, crediting area legislators with working cooperatively to keep the camp open.

Richard Harcrow, president of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association, praised legislators for restoring money that will keep Mt. McGregor and five other prison facilities open this year.

NYSCOPBA represents 74 workers at Mt. McGregor's minimum-security camp who's jobs were threatened by the proposed budget cuts.

"The state desperately needs all of its facilities not just to house inmates but to rehabilitate them as well," Harcrow said.

Clifford Seguin, president of local 168 of CSEA, which also represents workers whose jobs were to be cut, praised McDonald, Assemblyman Hugh Farley and state Senator Joseph Bruno for their support.

"These guys have done a heck of a job to keep us open," Seguin said.

Seguin said it's been difficult for him and his fellow employees at Mt. McGregor, waiting to hear if their jobs would indeed be cut.

"The morale and the attitude has been so stressful in the last few weeks. Sometimes it's difficult to do your job because you worry where you'll be working tomorrow," Seguin said.

And while their jobs look secure for the upcoming year, Seguin said workers are worried about the future.

"It's a big relief for right now but it's going to be a yearly fight. We're going to have to fight year after year after year," Seguin said.