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W I L T O N: Closing prisons get year notice

Legislation that saved McGregor includes clause

BY LEE COLEMAN Gazette Reporter

The state legislation that will keep the 300-inmate "camp" portion of Mount McGregor state prison open for at least another year also includes a "prior notification" clause.

This clause directs the state Department of Correctional Services to give local prison officials a one-year prior notification before a facility, like Camp McGregor, is closed, according to the president of the statewide corrections officers' union.

"That's extremely important," said Richard Harcrow, president of the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association Inc.

Harcrow, 45, the current leader of the 23,000-member union that includes corrections officers at all state prisons, said in the past the Department of Correctional Services had given very short notice — sometimes a matter of weeks — to corrections officers being affected by a facility closure or major change in staffing.

The state first proposed closing the minimum -security camp portion of Mount McGregor state prison in 2003. The planned closure of the camp did not affect the 528-inmate medium -security prison on Mount McGregor in Wilton.

State assemblymen and state senators representing the region joined union officials in fighting the closure — and loss of nearly 80 jobs at the prison. The closure was eventually rescinded.

The same thing happened this budget year. A compromise was again reached in the 2005-06 state budget, restoring money for the operation and staffing of Camp McGregor through the end of March 2006. Assemblyman Roy J. McDonald, R-Wilton, said he expects those who believe in Camp McGregor, as he does, will have to fight to keep it open every year.

Harcrow said his union members will also have to continue to be vigilant in keeping on top of the possible closure plans that affect McGregor as well as five other state correctional facilities, including Groveland Annex in Livingston County, Camp Pharsalia in Chenango County, the Watertown special housing unit in Jefferson County, the Fulton work release facility in Bronx County and the Greene special housing unit in Greene County.

State Correctional Services Department officials say that the number of minimum -security inmates has been on the decline in recent years. The minimum -security facilities are, therefore, not needed, they say.

"They do a lot of maintenance for small towns," Harcrow said about the camp facilities. "It's a good mix, the inmates pay back the taxpayers."

McGregor "campmen" — who worked under the guidance of armed corrections officers — have been used by towns throughout Saratoga County to do everything from maintaining old cemeteries to painting churches and other public buildings. The minimum -security inmates also work in state parks in the Saratoga region.

Harcrow spent 22 years as a corrections officer at Attica state prison before being elected to a statewide union position. He lives in western New York.