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**Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Prison’s Plumbing Problem Symbolic of a Broken System**

The Nebraska prison system has more than a plumbing problem.
There are also problems with parole, personnel and programs that are just as serious as leaking pipes.

I don’t want to gloss over the deferred maintenance problems with the 152-year-old penitentiary that has served the state well. Deferred maintenance is a problem in a number of old buildings on university and college campuses, especially in a culture that favors new and bright and shiny.

Incarcerated people and staff spent two days without running water while the pipes were fixed. The inspector general of the state's correctional system, Doug Koebernick, said "They're in a tough situation. This is not something you really plan for."

The Department of Correctional Services summoned a plumbing service, notified those at the prison of a water outage and crews worked around the clock for two days to fix several leaky pipes said corrections department spokeswoman Laura Strimple. The department brought in bottled water and portable bathrooms.

Corrections Director Scott Frakes said he’s proud that the problem was handled. "I don't have anywhere to send the 1,300 men that live there. So really, our repairs and ongoing maintenance, all are built around the fact that we're housing 1,300 convicted felons.” He and Governor Pete Ricketts are pushing for a new prison rather than spending almost as much to upgrade the current penitentiary.

"Invest $200 million in an old facility to get something that's about 75% of what you want, invest $230 million in a brand-new facility with a little bit more capacity. And it's clean from the ground to the top. So, it's pretty easy to run the numbers and see why it's a much more cost-effective better value for the taxpayers," Frakes said.

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But some lawmakers have also been fighting for reform in who is incarcerated and for what crimes in the first place. Then there’s the on-going issue of staffing and a high turnover rate in personnel. That lack of personnel leads to an inability to offer the programs that are necessary for the incarcerated to complete before they are considered for parole. The lack of parole leads to overcrowding.

A new voice in the debate is Omaha Senator Terrell McKinney who replaced longtime watchdog and critic Ernie Chambers. He paid a surprise visit to the penitentiary during the water crisis.

He told Omaha TV station KETV that “a water main breaking doesn't justify a new prison and not keeping up maintenance doesn't either.” His suggestion, “invest in people and keep up the maintenance that you have money for."

McKinney, who represents a district in North Omaha, has been a vocal advocate for the needs of imprisoned Nebraskans and broader criminal justice reform. He’s part of a group of public officials from across state government that’s working with a nonprofit to analyze data and propose reforms.

The issue is more personal than political to him, he said, because he knows people inside. “It’s important to me because I’ve dealt with it since I was a kid,” McKinney said. “I visited my father in prison, and I have always had family and friends who’ve been in and out of the system.”

Frakes and Ricketts are pushing for a new $230 million state prison designed to house about 1,600 inmates. They had wanted the Legislature’s Appropriations Committee to add $100 million to the budget to get the ball rolling on the project. Lawmakers agreed to $15 million to study the situation.

During the recent special legislative session on redistricting, McKinney used his time on the floor to talk about overcrowding and understaffing in the prison system that has led to critical concerns for the safety of inmates and staff.

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His bottom line, in which I concur, the current situation shows a lack of care and respect for those who are incarcerated. That needs to change.

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