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 **Capitol View**

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**Is Prison-Siting a Matter of Executive Privilege Too?**

We’ve known for some time that the state wants to build a new prison because it has the most overcrowded corrections system in the country.

It’s a given that state lawmakers agreed to spend at least $350 million on such a facility. A narrative change in recent months has shifted from “additional” space to a “replacement” for the existing Nebraska State Penitentiary, which has been in southwest Lincoln since the 1860s.

The unknown was how the siting for the new prison would be done. Rumor had it that some 70 locations were under consideration. That is until Governor Jim Pillen and his recently appointed State Corrections Director Rob Jeffreys, chose a 305-acre site just a mile outside Lincoln’s city limits in a fast- growing neighborhood of $500,000-plus homes.

We’re told the state is willing to pay $17 million for the property, which is also adjacent to a nature preserve and within a mile of an elementary school and similarly close to the well-established Lancaster Event Center. The city has long projected housing growth in that area of northeast Lincoln.

Maybe somebody forgot to tell the governor. No, wait; according to information that has come out since the Pillen announcement, it was the state that failed to notify the Lincoln City Council until moments before the announcement. The Lancaster County Board was told nothing and neighbors in northeast Lincoln were not notified.

Pillen and Jeffreys cited the location’s proximity to workforce and inmate families for being chosen. Interstate 80 is also close by, they said, easing visits by family and commutes for workers.

It’s not being built anywhere near Columbus where the governor lives and has his pig farm. Perhaps if he lived in Lincoln and had a sense of community. Maybe if Jeffreys had been in Lincoln longer.

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But, given that Pillen and his cronies are claiming executive privilege in a news media request for some e-mails, maybe that’s the new game plan. Ask yourself if prison siting is a similar matter of executive privilege.

It’s not that there are worries that the incarcerated will be scaling the fences and wriggling through barbed and concertina wire. Prisons are basically unsightly, and they are noisy and brightly lit at night. To say nothing of the traffic. Oh, and property values. The negatives go on and on.

So it is that Lincoln City Councilman James Michael Bowers has written an open letter to Pillen inviting him and other state and local officials to come to a town hall meeting to answer questions about the plans to build about a mile northeast of the city.

Kudos to him for trying to get the horse back in front of the cart, something the Pillen crew should have done to begin with. It’ll be interesting to see if the state shows up at the meeting planned for September 21.

Construction on the multi-custody facility will begin in the fall of 2024, Pillen has said. Right, and the big ditch to take water from the South Platte River in Colorado will be built and that bigger than Lake Okoboji project between Lincoln and Omaha will be started. More likely, attorneys for all three will be in court for the next few years.

Neighbors of Waterford Estates and other new northeast Lincoln neighborhoods have expressed their opposition to a prison. They would have done it earlier if they had been informed. Look for a very strong Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) response to develop.

In his invitation, Bowers wrote “we respectfully request more information and a stronger commitment to transparency and dialogue about this issue with you in the coming weeks and months.” The letter said leaders and the general public want to learn more about how this decision was made and hope the governor would reconsider the decision to place the prison, which is “misaligned with our fast-growing and vibrant North Lincoln neighborhoods."

Bowers said the meeting would allow residents an opportunity to share their concerns.

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“Our voice and participation in this process have been taken away from us,” he wrote. “You, and your team’s presence at this event would demonstrate a commitment to hearing the voices of Northeast Lincoln residents and allow us to work together to find a solution that addresses both your plans for a prison and the concerns of Northeast Lincoln families.”

There’s a concept. Don’t cram it down our throat, work with us.

Give it a try Governor.

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