

Second company abandons Evanston immigration jail project

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A second private prison company has walked away from a proposal to build and operate a for-profit immigration jail in Evanston that the company said would bring high-paying jobs to the struggling town and surrounding county.

The decision casts doubt on the future of a project that has divided the community for almost three years.

The Uinta County Commission announced Wednesday that CoreCivic, a sprawling corporation that runs prisons and jails for federal and state governments, as well as jails for immigrants detained by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, had backed out.

“After participating in the process to date in good faith, there were ultimately a number of factors that made it difficult for us to consider proceeding,” CoreCivic said in the press release.

CoreCivic is the second company in nine months to walk away from building a 1,000-bed facility to hold immigrants seized by ICE and awaiting deportation. Management Training Corporation first brought the project to town in the summer of 2017. That private prison company abruptly backed out in July of 2019.

CoreCivic entered the picture almost immediately on MTC's heels. MTC "turned over" the project to CoreCivic, an executive with the second company said during a December visit to Evanston. The proposal has had warm support from the Uinta County Commission and other local elected officials throughout the process.

"We appreciate the support we've received from Evanston, Uinta County and the surrounding community," CoreCivic said in the press release.

"Throughout this process, Uinta County officials have been engaging and deliberate in their efforts to inform themselves about the proposed facility and advocate for its potential benefits on behalf of their community."

For its part, the Uinta County Commission said in the press release it is "open to continued relations with CoreCivic."

Though local elected officials have been welcoming to the companies, the idea of the for-profit jail divided Evanston. As the private prison companies deliberated the project and drew up plans, public meetings in the county saw contentious debate as people entrenched themselves for or against the polarizing project.



Builders for the private prison company CoreCivic presented this rendering of an immigration jail proposed for outside Evanston at a public meeting on Dec. 2. (CoreCivic)

During the December visit, CoreCivic officials pitched the project as a source of good jobs for local residents and an economic infusion into an area struggling through an oil and gas downturn. CoreCivic suggested jail guards would start with \$52,000 a year salaries, plus healthcare, dental and 401(k) benefits.

The company's withdrawal comes with few specifics. The company didn't offer local officials an in-depth explanation, commissioner Mark Anderson told WyoFile.

"It was more of a business decision on their end," he said. The project came with a steep up-front investment of \$150 million to \$160 million to build the jail, Anderson said. It appeared to him that the company had run into hangups with ICE that kept it from guaranteeing a profitable return on those costs, he said.

"None of that negotiation on their end sounds like it panned out," he said.

A CoreCivic spokesperson declined to provide further explanation to WyoFile.

In recent months the project appeared to be accelerating even as opposition ramped up. CoreCivic submitted environmental review documents to the federal government. On Jan. 21, the commission passed a resolution to sell 63 acres to the company. The sale was contingent on CoreCivic securing an ICE contract, Anderson said, and thus didn't occur.

In a letter the same day, the ACLU challenged a Wyoming Attorney General's opinion that the project was a local affair and did not require a decision from Gov. Mark Gordon and other statewide elected officials.

Anderson did not know if the company's change in plans had anything to do with the COVID-19 pandemic that has derailed much of the nation's economy and caused the federal government to approve spending \$2 trillion in aid with the potential for more on the way. "Right now there's a lot of uncertainty," Anderson said. "The government is spending a lot of money. You just don't know what's going on in the inner circles in Washington."

Anderson didn't write off the project returning, either through CoreCivic or another company. The for-profit prison and detention industry is dominated by three major players, two of which have now spent time courting Evanston before walking away. The third company, GEO Group, runs a private immigration detention center outside Denver.

No other company has approached the commission in the wake of CoreCivic's withdrawal, Anderson said. However, "this is by no means saying this is not going to happen ever," he said.=

Anderson mourned the loss of potential jobs for the area, and said "there's a lot of people that were discouraged" by the company's decision, he said. "I'm still hopeful we can get some good paying jobs back in southwest Wyoming."

Opponents celebrate

Though both Gordon and his predecessor, former Gov. Matt Mead, said Uinta County has exclusive purview over the choice to build a jail, the proposal has been debated on the floor of the Wyoming House of Representatives and in 2018's gubernatorial campaign.

The proposal also spurred the creation of a local and statewide activist group called WyoSayNo that, with the ACLU of Wyoming, opposed the prison project.

"This is a reason for all people who live in Wyoming and our neighboring states to celebrate," ACLU of Wyoming and WyoSayNo organizer Antonio Serrano wrote in a statement Wednesday. "A 1,000-bed facility that would have cycled 800 people through it a month and would have caused the pain and suffering of so many of our neighbors will not be built."

Like Anderson, Serrano is not writing off the project's resurrection. "While we take a moment to celebrate, we are not naive to the fact that this threat could come back some day," he wrote.



The Uinta County Commission at the start of a December public meeting where private prison company CoreCivic pitched its plan to area residents. (Andrew Graham/WyoFile)

Uinta County Commission Chairman Eric South did not respond to a voicemail from WyoFile. But comments he made to the Casper Star-Tribune summed up the rancor the project has left in Evanston.

“All these bleeding hearts and liberals ought to be happy about it,” South told the newspaper.

Local opponents have criticized the commission for lacking transparency and being too cozy with prison company officials. Local officials chose not to announce that MTC initially pulled out of the project and CoreCivic stepped in.=

“The county commissioners have ignored the concerns of their own neighbors and constituents, repeatedly showing that they are not working for the people and they must be held to account,” Serrano wrote.

But others in Evanston have argued a majority of residents support the project. “Maybe you don’t feel like they’re representing you right now,” one supporter told jail opponents during a public comment period during CoreCivic’s January visit. “But they could be representing the majority of us.”