

Prison Treatment Centers and Woeful Leadership
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November Mayoral Message

This month's mayoral message is related to two recent articles that discussed the proposition of Knoxville being home to a state prison treatment center. The first article appeared in the Des Moines Register on November 15, the second appeared in Steve Woodhouse's column in the November 23 edition of the Knoxville Journal-Express.

The Des Moines Register article referenced a committee of the Iowa Legislature that recently met and discussed the proposed construction of a new prison facility at Fort Madison, prison expansions in Mitchellville and Newton, and community correction facilities in Des Moines, Ottumwa, Sioux City and Waterloo. The projected cost for the prison upgrades is \$239.4 million. The committee co-chair, Cedar Rapids Representative Todd Taylor, was quoted in the Register article. "Taylor also said he would welcome consideration of proposals to develop the Knoxville Veterans Affairs Medical Center and the Independence Mental Health Institute as state prison treatment centers or as community corrections facilities."

Firstly, I want to say I'm not against drug treatment. It has an important role in the process of combating the scourge of drug-related issues. I was, however, as Steve Woodhouse noted in his column, a vocal opponent in the placement of a drug treatment center at the VA campus in 2001. I'm glad today's Iowa legislative leaders, unlike the politicians and bureaucrats of 2001, are now calling the treatment center what it is - a prison. Anytime a person is sentenced and mandated to be housed in a lock-down facility with their freedom of movement removed, it is a prison or jail. Therefore, I'm still against the proposal as are the majority of Knoxville's business and community leaders, but the following comments are solely mine.

My opposition to a prison drug treatment center at the Knoxville VA is not rooted in "not in my backyard." It is based on first hand experience, as a former police officer and police administrator, and what's in the best interest of Knoxville. Some years ago, when the VA provided an in-patient drug treatment program, the city of Knoxville and its police department experienced a surge in crime-related problems. Crimes and investigations increased, and not necessarily as a result of persons receiving treatment, but because of perpetrators that followed some of the patients to Knoxville. In some cases, they were reportedly a friend of a friend and did not have any personal connection to anyone receiving treatment or the VA. Secondly, if you're to have meaningful and effective drug treatment there must be aftercare treatment -- "half-way" houses. Rhetorically speaking, can you identify the neighborhood for the proper placement of the aftercare facility? Thirdly, I contend prison drug treatment centers should be placed in large communities where there are adequate resources to address the problems that we've experienced and where the placement more easily blends in to the local environment.

In 2001, I told then-mayor Mike Cunningham and then-city manager Brian James that if the prison drug treatment center were placed at the VA that I would be requesting additional officers to handle the influx of calls and problems. I made that statement even though I knew the state's ill-conceived taxing policy of "rollback" was having a devastating effect on our city's budget. Fortunately the prison drug treatment proposal was not enacted because of budget-related considerations at the state level. In 2003, the state cut funding to Iowa municipalities and

as a result of further revenue reductions because of “rollback,” a police officer vacancy was not filled and the Department has operated at less than its authorized personnel level ever since.

My final opposition to a prison drug treatment center is related to important economic development considerations, including the expansion of the city’s tax base. We’re in the midst of trying to make our community more attractive to new residents, businesses, and taking advantage of current economic development opportunities. We want to attract young families, especially since our school district projects further declines in enrollment. Knoxville has an excellent educational system, superb public safety departments, outstanding recreational opportunities, a strong economic base, and a tremendous natural heritage. Although we have exceptional assets, we’re competing with neighboring communities that enjoy similar resources; they’re attempting to attract young families as well. Some food for thought and another rhetorical question: if you’re a young couple with small children and you’re looking to relocate to a new community and it comes down to two communities of similar size, similar amenities and quality of life, one has a college and the other a prison treatment center, which would you choose?

Knoxville should cultivate a long-term perspective and not settle for short-term gains, which often inhibit long-term benefits and solutions. Knoxville has tremendous opportunities and possibilities. For that reason I formed the Knoxville VA Task Force to meet the ongoing challenges and act in a proactive manner for the greater good and in the best interests of our community. A prison treatment center, another tax exempt entity, would seriously inhibit our efforts to attract private sector concerns to the VA campus. I doubt many businesses would want to locate next to a prison. At best, a prison treatment center would be a short-term gain and would restrain long-term opportunities and benefits for our city.

It’s worth noting that most of the state’s elected officials and bureaucrats that were the major proponents for a prison treatment center at the Knoxville VA in 2001 were from Iowa’s largest city and a rapidly expanding suburb. It came as no surprise, though, that none of the principals offered or wanted to have the proposed facility in their respective communities, where they have the resources and physical structures for said center. And I submit to Representative Todd Taylor, that’s probably the case in Iowa’s second largest city, Cedar Rapids. Your city, Cedar Rapids, I’m confident, has the resources and means to house a prison treatment center, but I doubt you “would welcome consideration” of a proposal for a prison treatment center in your city.

Steve Woodhouse accurately described and quoted my frustrations with Iowa legislative leaders, “I’m tired of them doing things to Knoxville and not for Knoxville.” He was correct when he said he thought I was frustrated because state officials keep Knoxville’s leaders outside their deliberations about the placement of a prison treatment center in Knoxville. In truth, they didn’t contact us in 2001, during last year’s legislative session, nor recently. I not only find that disconcerting, but also disingenuous, condescending, and arrogant. But I also find it disheartening that the legislative leaders of both parties, Democrat and Republican, do not exhibit political courage or the will to correct the wrong-headed tax policy of 25 years, “rollback,” that has immeasurably harmed rural Iowa municipalities. That’s woeful leadership!