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Illinois prison sale hits another snag

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The state's effort to sell a northwestern Illinois prison to the federal government, stalled in Washington for years over fears that Guantanamo Bay terrorism detainees would be transferred stateside, is now caught up in a squabble among congressional Republicans.



The latest wrinkle in the Thomson prison sale to generate millions for a cash-starved state government came late last week. Ten of the state's Republican congressmen wrote to Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn, asking him to lower the price to try to win support from a balking and powerful House GOP colleague.

Quinn's office and home-state President Barack Obama's administration already have agreed on a \$165 million price, below the \$220 million that the little-used prison was appraised at but \$25 million more than it cost to build in 2001.

The fate of Thomson and the promise of more than 1,000 jobs in northwestern Illinois involve Rep. Bobby Schilling of Colona, a freshman tea party Republican in a targeted contest who desperately wants the sale of the little-used prison to go through as he seeks re-election.

It also involves Rep. Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia, a powerful veteran Republican who chairs a House subcommittee that oversees prison spending. Wolf opposes the prison purchase because of fears that the Obama White House wants to move detainees there from Cuba despite a law against it and assurances by administration officials.

The latest assurance against moving potential terrorists to Thomson came June 14, when Attorney General Eric Holder testified before a Senate panel. But Holder, whose Department of Justice oversees the federal Bureau of Prisons, also has been labeled untrustworthy by House Republicans who last week voted to hold him in contempt over the failed Fast and Furious gun-walking program.

Asked if a lower price tag for Thomson would ensure Wolf's support, Schilling spokeswoman Andrea Pivarunas said, "There are different people and many factors involved in getting this done."

As for a suggested price, Pivarunas said the Bureau of Prisons told Schilling's office it has about \$75 million in leftover money in its budget.

But the prisons bureau also has found \$165 million to purchase Thomson from funds that could be rechanneled from other programs, meeting the terms of the deal struck by the state and federal governments that Wolf has blocked.

"For nearly a decade, the answer to (the question), 'Can we get Thomson open as a federal prison?' has been 'no,' and while Congressman Schilling is new to elected office, he's is willing to work with anyone and everyone to find a way to get to 'yes' and help create jobs where unemployment is above the national average," Pivarunas said. "This is all about finding a way to 'yes.'"

Brooke Anderson, a spokeswoman for the governor, said part of Quinn's responsibility in the sale of Thomson is doing "everything we can to protect the taxpayers."

"We think that if the sale goes through, which we hope it does quickly, that \$165 million would be a fair and reasonable price for everybody involved," Anderson said.

Taking note of the squabbles among Republicans in the House, Anderson said, "We hope that our Illinois congressional delegation will focus on promoting all of the benefits ... of completing this transaction as quickly as possible to all of their congressional colleagues."

The letter to Quinn, signed by every House Republican from Illinois except retiring Rep. Tim Johnson of Urbana, brought a partisan focus to a proposal that has had bipartisan support. In the Senate, Democrat Dick Durbin and Republican Mark Kirk have supported the sale.

Democratic House members also were asked to sign the letter but refused, said a source who asked not to be identified because the person was not authorized to speak.

Earlier this week, Schilling and neighboring Rep. Don Manzullo, a Republican from Egan, also ratcheted up the partisan divide when Quinn announced he was exploring the sale of the state's soon-to-be shuttered Tamms "supermax" prison to the federal government.

Manzullo said the move "may have doomed" the Thomson sale. Schilling questioned how Quinn's actions fit in with an Illinois delegation that "has been working closely to find a bipartisan way" on Thomson, making no mention of the GOP letter sent to the governor.

But Quinn aides rejected the Republicans' warnings and said the Thomson prison sale effort stands on its own.
