

# GRITS FOR BREAKFAST

WELCOME TO TEXAS JUSTICE: YOU MIGHT BEAT THE RAP, BUT YOU WON'T BEAT THE RIDE.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 14, 2010

## Might 2011 budget crunch bring TX prison closures?

This morning I stopped in for a panel discussion sponsored by the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), a conservative Austin-based think tank, on the topic of "Corrections Solutions for a Tight Budget" at [their big annual conference](#), and was pleased to hear state leaders tentatively embrace a suggestion I've been promoting here on Grits: Closing some of Texas' most expensive or difficult-to-staff prison units to make prisons safer and cheaper.

Among the speakers, Dr. Tony Fabelo was most blunt on this question, suggesting openly that Texas "try to save money by closing down prisons," citing examples in Michigan, Connecticut and elsewhere to say it could be done safely. The biggest challenge in 2011, he said: "If we're not careful the Legislature could screw this up again" by slashing probation, parole and treatment programming to prop up prison spending, which is what happened in 2003. Instead, Fabelo ticked off several units that are well over 100 years old and much more expensive to run than modern facilities, suggesting that budget cutters start there when it's time to make cuts at TDCJ.

State Sen. Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire put the big picture into perspective, pointing out that Texas spends about \$3 billion per year to house a population about 1-1/2 times the size of Waco. He also pointed out the irony that most of the (rather large, impressive and public-official laden) crowd assembled to discuss corrections policy were anglos while most folks in prison or TYC were minorities.

"Texas will never release people early to save money," Whitmire predicted - certainly not in the [wholesale fashion that may end up happening in California](#) - but he acknowledged there may be "one or two" facilities out of the 112 Texas operates that are inefficient and need to be closed. He cited a facility in Mineral Wells where officials had to put up golf netting to catch contraband being thrown by passersby over the fence. It might make sense, he said, to close that facility, take the 2,000 inmates currently locked up there, and send 20 each to TDCJ's other hundred-plus units with a result of less cost and greater security. Coupled with Fabelo's comments, one gets a sense of where possible cuts to TDCJ's institutional division might come if the Legislature reduces their budget next year.

Whitmire said he thought TDCJ's budget should be exempt from any across-the-board budget cuts like the ones suggested recently by Lt. Gov. Dewhurst. He also cautioned against cutting too deeply into social services - particularly community mental health treatment - because Texas jails and prisons have become the *de facto* mental health providers and the state pays more in the long run by not addressing the problem.

House Corrections Chairman Jim McReynolds didn't say specifically he'd consider closing prison units, but that seemed to be at least partially the implication when he said budgeters' biggest priority should be to protect recent investments in probation and parole. McReynolds particularly wanted Texas to keep up and expand its commitments to specialty drug and mental health courts and to expand their funding to smaller jurisdictions (McReynolds is from a rural East Texas district). If the state "protects" probation and parole funding, of course, that leaves its prisons as the only place to make cuts if that's what state budgeters require.

McReynolds wants offenders processed out of TDCJ sooner after the parole board approves their release. He also suggested that rather than release violent offenders after serving their full "flat time" then releasing them into the community unsupervised, that offenders with long sentences get out a little earlier and spend their first year or so on parole to provide greater supervision and support during the reentry period that's critical to reducing recidivism.

Adam Gelb of the Pew Center on the States gave a presentation to the group that was similar to [this one](#) (pdf) described on Grits in a [couple](#) of recent [posts](#), so I'll refer you to those instead of repeat the analysis here.

These comments collectively - particularly given the conservative forum in which they were delivered - gave me hope that the Legislature in 2011 might resist the urge to dismantle programs that contributed to recent [reductions in Texas' incarceration rate](#). Time will tell, but it's good to hear the discussion beginning now.

Thanks a lot, btw, to Marc Levin and everybody else at TPPF who were gracious enough to extend me a media pass for the event.

### See related Grits posts:

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- [2011 Budget Blues: Close prison units to shave 2.5% at TDCJ](#)
- [Can Dewhurst budget cut goals be met by closing prison units?](#)
- [Data on TDCJ unit age and cost](#)
- [States slashing spending costs, closing units](#)
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- [Emptying prisons makes Wired magazine's 'Smart List'](#)
- [California's partisan prison meltdown: Why Texas didn't go there](#)
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POSTED BY GRITSFORBREAKFAST AT 1:20 PM 

LABELS: [BUDGET](#), [PAROLE](#), [PROBATION](#), [TEXAS LEGISLATURE](#)

### 6 COMMENTS:



Boyness said...

This pipe dream will never fly in prison-crazed Texas!

1/14/2010 04:05:00 PM



ckikerintulia said...

Never say never!

1/14/2010 08:04:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Funny how Whitmire mentioned closing Mineral Wells. I had recently read that a private company Emerald Corrections had tried 3 times to get a facility there (for ICE detention) and was disapproved.

Think this is a back door for that company?

1/14/2010 08:51:00 PM

Anonymous said...

They could offer early retirement for those with over 20years of service sense they say that they are at 95% staffed and there is 5 people waiting to get hired to every opening.

1/14/2010 09:40:00 PM



Gritsforbreakfast said...

ABOUT ME



GRITSFORBREAKFAST  
AUSTIN, TEXAS

*Grits for Breakfast* looks at the Texas criminal justice system, with a little politics and whatever else suits the author's fancy thrown in. All opinions are my own. The facts belong to everybody. [About Me.](#)

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