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Braley: Thomson a strong contender

By Jason Nevel
Herald Staff Writer

THOMSON, Ill. — Thomson Correctional Center appears to be the leading candidate to house terror detainees being transferred from Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

U.S. Congressman Bruce Braley on Monday said after a tour of the facility with Federal Bureau of Prisons and Department of Defense officials that the prison located about 12 miles north of Clinton on the Illinois side is a strong contender.

"They're looking at a number of different facilities but right now this one is at the top of the list because it offers them everything they're looking for," the Waterloo Democrat said.

Braley said he wants to continue to talk with colleagues and constituents before he backs the measure, which has not been given a timeline.

Harley Lappin, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, was less committed. He said it's still early in the process and there are a number of options being considered. However, Lappin did say Thomson had the capabilities required to meet federal standards.

"This is a fine, fine facility of a high security nature," he said.

Officials in Hardin, Mont., Florence, Colo., and Marion, also have said they would welcome Guantanamo inmates.

If chosen, the economic impact would likely extend to Clinton and could mean a need for additional housing. With Clinton being the largest city closest to Thomson, Clinton Area Chamber of Commerce President Julie Allesee said a percentage of people hired would live in Clinton or at least come here to shop.

"It could be a very big situation for us," Allesee said. "I'm waiting to hear how soon and then we'll put our committees into action based on what we hear."

When the prison was built in 2001, Clinton officials built a new subdivision to accommodate workers. Despite the prison never being completely open because of state budget problems, Allesee said all the homes were filled.

The changing of Thomson into a federal prison appears to be splitting along partisan lines. Several Illinois Republicans have said bringing accused terrorists to Illinois is a safety threat, while Democrats have dismissed those concerns and cited the potential job growth for a community with an unemployment rate at more than 10 percent.

Republican U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk, Manzullo, Judy Biggert and Peter Roskam called the federal government's plan to buy Thomson prison too risky at a news conference in Chicago on Monday.

U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin and Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, both Democrats, called the measure an "opportunity of a lifetime" and pointed out at a press conference Sunday that there have been zero escapes from a maximum-security prison.

Lappin said the Federal Bureau of Prisons would employ between 800 and 900 people with about 400 to 500 being new hires. Phillip Carter, deputy secretary of defense, who is in charge of detainee policy, said the majority of the Department of Defense presence would be military personnel.

The construction of a new security fence could also bring in jobs along with workers needed to maintain the facility. Government estimates have tagged the potential job growth at around 3,000.

"Without a doubt we would love to have as many staff from the Illinois Department of Corrections who have an interest in working for the Bureau of Prisons," Lappin said. "Those jobs are going to be very competitive."

If Thomson was selected, the prison would be purchased by the federal government and also house about 1,500 to 1,600 maximum-security inmates. The part housing fewer than 100 Guantanamo Bay prisoners would be leased to the Defense Department.

The Guantanamo transfers would not be released back into community and they would not be allowed to have visitors, Carter said.

Photos



Federal Bureau of Prisons director Harley Lappin talks Monday about jobs that would be created in the Thomson, Ill., area from Guantanamo Bay detainees being held at the Thomson Correctional Facility. Associated Press **Joe Tamborello/Associated Press** (Click for larger image)

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Illinois built the 1,600-cell prison in 2001 for a cost of \$140 million. It was never fully opened because of state budget problems and it currently houses about 200 minimum-security inmates.



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