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Residents of Thomson, Illinois would rather get Gitmo prisoners

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By DEANNA BELLANDI, Associated Press Writer

THOMSON, IL (AP) -- Some folks in this dying Mississippi River town would rather take their chances with suspected terrorists in their backyard than watch their neighbors continue to move away in despair over the lack of jobs.

News that the federal government may buy the nearly empty Thomson Correctional Center and use the maximum-security state prison to house Guantanamo Bay detainees has given people in Thomson hope that things might be about to turn around in this woeful town of 450.

"This town is slowly but surely dying off, and I mean that literally because the people that are retired are dying off and there's no young people coming back in to take their place. There's nothing here to draw them," said Richard Groharing, a 68-year-old retired Florida corrections officer who was born in Thomson, a farming community about 150 miles west of Chicago.

The prison was built in 2001 with the promise of thousands of jobs. But because of state budget problems, it has been largely vacant since its completion. It has 1,600 cells, but only about 200 minimum-security inmates are held there.

The Obama administration wants to close the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and transfer some terrorism suspects to the U.S. for trial. On Monday, federal officials were at the Thomson prison to inspect it and meet with state and local authorities.



Thomson Correctional Center

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While Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and Sen. Dick Durbin, both Democrats, welcomed the possibility of locking up Guantanamo detainees at Thomson, several other Illinois lawmakers objected, warning that it would make the Chicago area a terrorist target.

But some folks who live in the shadow of the prison don't buy that.

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If Chicago is a target, they say, it's because it is a big city, not because detainees are held elsewhere in Illinois.

"They're always in jeopardy anyway for attacks," said Denny Percy, a retiree hanging out with his buddies at a bait shop down the road from the prison.

Bait shop owner Todd Baker said a federal takeover of the prison would be good for the town and surrounding Carroll County, where unemployment is 10.5 percent.

Baker said it could spur new housing, gas stations and other businesses that would create jobs and customers for his shop, which is stocked with fishing supplies and serves as a local hangout.

The Obama administration has also considered sending Guantanamo detainees to other locations in the U.S., including the maximum-security prison in Standish, Mich., where many residents also have welcomed the idea in the hope that it would spur jobs.

Lawmakers said they were told in a briefing from the Pentagon and the federal Bureau of Prisons that between 450 and 500 new employees would be hired at \$37,000 to \$47,000 a year at Thomson if it received Guantanamo detainees.

Quinn and others estimate a federal takeover would create as many as 3,000 jobs in all, counting the new businesses created.

"I got a feeling that it will wind up being a boon for this town," Groharing said.

However, no hiring preference will be given to locals, and new hires must be under 37 and must be or become law enforcement officers. Some worry that locals who already work at the prison could lose their jobs.

Durbin accused lawmakers critical of the proposal of fearmongering and political posturing. He said that fewer than 100 of the inmates would be from Guantanamo Bay, and that the government would build an extra perimeter fence around the prison.

"This would be the most secure prison in the United States of America," the senator said.

And if any of the detainees or other inmates at the prison were to escape, some Thomson residents know how to protect themselves.

"I've got plenty of weapons and ammunition at my house," said Dave Lawton, a 62-year-old retiree.

Associated Press writers Sophia Tareen in Chicago and John Flesher in Traverse City, Mich., contributed to this report.

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 theizy wrote:
A prison is a prison regardless of what name it goes by! Why shut down a perfectly good secure prison, having to buy another one beef up security (because now your putting civilians in jeopardy)in order to keep a promise you made to voters who didn't have a clue to begin with. Yeah this will cost 8 million to shut down Gitmo, and who know how many million to get this prison ready. The only thing these people know how to do is spend money, I can't wait till the next election to get these clowns out of office.

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 tballbill wrote:
as far as i'm concerned you people can adopt the entire taliban; just keep 'em on your side of the river.





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camdawggy wrote:

Just out of curiosity, has anyone looked into the implications of holding these guys in a civilian prison, with civilian guards? I think that's not really legal under the Geneva Convention. It's also downright despicable, seeing as just 40 years ago we were taking issue with N.Vietnam for holding POWs as civilian prisoners and trying them in civilian courts.

Has O'Bama actually, in just 10 months, made us into the same style as the communist government that 56,000 or more Americans, and over 1 million South Vietnamese died fighting against? I have heard people say that these wars are "like Vietnam all over", but I didn't realize when they were saying that, they meant that we were going to be the side that we hated.

Truly. Unbelievable.

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