

Hidden cost?

Reps find parole reform won't be cheap

By TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Most state representatives wouldn't talk out loud about the down side of a popular parole reform bill they adopted last week on a 99-2 vote.

But a staff memo to House Republicans spelled trouble ahead: "A direct consequence will be more inmates within Michigan's prisons and a higher budget for prisons," warned the House GOP legal counsel. "As of July 1, 1992, there were 32,600 male prisoners in space designed for 24,885 — 7,721 over capacity."

The staff predicted more prisoners because: "The rate of parole is likely to drop because an inexperienced and politically accountable board is going to be more cautious and afraid to make a mistake."

Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, D-Detroit, voted yes but said only \$58 million of the Corrections Department's \$1 billion budget goes for probation and parole. "The state has only 633 probation officers supervising 58,000 probationers," she said.

"Prison budgets are soaring due to lost hopes and high unemployment. Not one of the Fortune 500 companies has increased employment this year," Kilpatrick said.

All vote yes

All area lawmakers voted yes except Democrat William Keith of Garden City who was absent.

Meanwhile, Gov. John Engler signed a Department of Corrections budget bill providing funds to open three new regional prisons and one new maximum security prison in the Upper Peninsula. It also will provide for continued operation of Cape Pugsley and Waterloo, which had been scheduled to close this year.

The sudden action on parole was prompted by parolee Leslie Williams' confession that he killed young women in South Lyon, Milford and northern Livingston County, among other crimes.

But Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, warned that an earlier Williams' conviction was plea-bargained down from burglary and rape to just burglary. "As long as we view rape as not as important as breaking and entering, these Williams cases will keep occurring," said Berman.

Voting against the bill were Rep. Ted Wallace, D-Detroit, who wanted the matter to go through his House Corrections Committee, and Rep. Bill Martin, R-Battle Creek, who wanted even stronger penalties. Lawmakers bypassed Wallace's

committee and tacked the parole reform onto a minor bill that was in House-Senate conference committee.

Careerists out

House Bill 4130, which goes to the state Senate for concurrence, will:

- Set up a parole board appointed by the director of the Corrections Department (himself an appointee of the governor) instead of career civil servants.
- Give members staggered four-year terms.
- Expand the board to 10 members from the current seven.
- Require the Legislature Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR) to approve the department's parole guidelines.
- Require lifers to serve at least 15 years (instead of the current 10) before qualifying for parole.

• Allow a crime victim or prosecutor to appear a prisoner's parole to a court.

• Allow streamlining of parole interview procedures. Lifers would be interviewed less frequently. Low-risk prisoners can be denied parole without an interview. High-risk

prisoners can be denied parole without an interview. Purpose: to allow closer attention to more important cases.

• Require the Corrections Department to ask a probate court for involuntary commitment for discharged or paroled prisoners who require mental health treatment, either because they are threats to themselves or others.

The new parole board is established Oct. 1. The old one is abolished Nov. 15, so there will be six weeks overlap.

Rally at Capitol

House passage was preceded by a week of news conferences and rallies at which lawmakers deplored the fate of rape and murder victims.

"Our present parole board is not accountable to the people," said Rep. Willis Bullard, R-Milford, in whose district Williams struck twice. He addressed a rally the previous day on the State Capitol steps. Some 40,000 people signed cards expressing outrage at the parole system.

Sen. Joe Conroy, D-Flint, introduced bills to create a Crime Victim Advocate office to assist victims and monitor the parole system.

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