

Massachusetts 'Prison' Town Rounding Up New Lockups

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Massachusetts 'Prison' Town Rounding Up New Lockups
By MICHAEL TIGHE, ASSOCIATED PRESS

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LANCASTER, Mass.--Residents of this bedroom community of 6,200 already have thousands of criminals in their midst, and they're about to get thousands more. Soon, four prisons will stand within a few miles of their homes and schools.

Some towns would bristle at the idea, but here, the prison industry is driving the local economy and complainers appear few and far between.

"Getting this money was important to running the town," said John Bailey, the chairman of the Board of Selectmen. "It really is a bonanza for Lancaster."

This summer's ground-breaking on a \$130-million maximum-security prison will pave the way for 1,024 cells in a town that is already home to two state prisons. Together, they hold nearly 1,500 prisoners.

Also, a minimum-security federal prison for 1,000 inmates is planned at Ft. Devens, the recently closed Army base that is partly in Lancaster.

The community, about 32 miles northwest of Boston, beat out two other towns--Bridgewater and Gardner--for the honor of becoming home to the state's most dangerous criminals.

"They were lobbying the state for the new prison facility," said Department of Corrections spokesman Tony Carnevale. "It was far from a case of 'not in my backyard.' "

Indeed, if the new prison were to be built 20 feet farther away, the state's \$10.24-million "mitigation" payment would have gone to neighboring Shirley. Instead, Lancaster will get half.

The existing lockups include the medium-security MCI-Shirley and the minimum-security MCI-Lancaster. The new prison, set to open in 1998, was approved by selectmen and residents at two town meetings.

"We'd be crazy not to do it," Bailey said.

Besides the \$5.1-million mitigation payment, the town will receive another \$500,000 to offset previous expansion of MCI-Lancaster.

Families thinking of settling in this wooded town have always asked about the taxes and the schools. Now, some are asking about the prisons.

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