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Desert prison wanted

LOCKUP: A state Senate budget panel votes to keep Eagle Mountain's sole industry operating.

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By ROBERT T. GARRETT
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

SACRAMENTO - Eastern Riverside County residents pleaded with lawmakers Wednesday not to shut down Eagle Mountain's sole industry, a private prison.

"This community will close," warned Jeannette "Jan" Roberts of Desert Center.

Hundreds of desert schoolchildren and thousands of retired Kaiser steelworkers would suffer if the state yanks its 400 male inmates out of the prison, which leases the site of a former Kaiser iron mine, Roberts said.

A Senate budget panel voted 2-0 to keep open the Eagle Mountain prison, another in Baker in San Bernardino County and three in the Central Valley.

But the powerful state prison guards' union and Gov. Davis want the five private lockups shut down after June 30, when their contracts with the state expire.

Margit Chiriaco-Rusche, owner of the Chiriaco Summit Travel Center, said closing the Eagle Mountain prison would displace 100 families and "again force the town into becoming a ghost town."

The inmates pick up litter along a 50-mile stretch of Interstate 10 and do menial labor associated with a large veterans' gathering each September at the General Patton Memorial Museum at Chiriaco Summit, 20 miles west of the Eagle Mountain exit, she said.

Linda Gubman is principal of Eagle Mountain School, which has 51 students. If the prison closes, she said, any children whose families don't move away would have to board buses shortly after 5 a.m. to attend school in Blythe, about 50 miles away.

Operators of the five prisons, who voiced pessimism about their prospects of survival after an Assembly budget subcommittee voted

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earlier this month to close them, hailed the Senate action Wednesday.

"We're a little bit more optimistic," said Michael Murphy, marketing director for Utah-based Management & Training Corp., which runs the Eagle Mountain Community Correctional Facility. "So we're going to keep working hard to educate everybody about the cost savings that we think we provide to the state."

The numbers have been in dispute since the state in 1988 signed 10-year contracts with private companies to run six minimum-security prisons. One closed in 1992, but four more privately operated prisons opened in 1997-98.

Craig Brown, a lobbyist for the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, which represents guards who work at state prisons, said the nine private prisons mask their true cost by shipping chronically ill inmates back to the state Corrections Department for care.

But Rod Blonien, a lobbyist for Wackenhut Corrections Corp., which operates two Kern County prisons threatened with closure, said the state doesn't include prison-construction borrowing costs in its estimate of how much it spends to house an inmate at its institutions.

So comparisons are difficult to make, he said.

When Davis proposed in January to close five of the private prisons this summer, he estimated a net savings of \$5.1 million a year. Legislative Analyst Elizabeth Hill recently estimated the maximum savings would be \$2.8 million.

State Sen. Richard Polanco, D-Los Angeles, said some community correctional facilities operated by cities have been poorly run, but not the privately operated prisons.

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