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Senate subcommittee rejects Davis' new prison plan

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By Don Thompson

ASSOCIATED PRESS

April 24, 2002

SACRAMENTO – A Senate budget subcommittee stripped money intended to build California's first new prison since 1995 on Wednesday, saying the maximum-security facility is unnecessary as the state's prison population falls.

Committee members also restored money for five community correctional facilities Gov. Gray Davis had promised to close.

They disputed the Department of Corrections' population projections and its inmate classification system, and said the state can't afford to build a new Delano II maximum-security prison as it faces as much as a \$20 billion budget deficit.

Davis' administration will fight to reverse the subcommittee's decisions during budget negotiations this spring, said Youth and Adult Correctional Agency spokesman Steve Green.

The decisions were made by just two subcommittee members, led by Sen. Richard Polanco, D-Los Angeles. He chairs both the subcommittee and the Senate Public Safety Committee.

Opening a new 5,000-bed maximum-security prison while closing five low-security privately operated prisons makes sense because the nature of the prison population is shifting, testified Corrections Director Edward S. Alameida Jr.

"We're getting a more violent prison inmate coming to our system," he said. "You're seeing a transformation in the prison system."

There are fewer lower-security inmates because voter-approved Proposition 36 took effect in July, sending first- and second-time nonviolent drug offenders to treatment instead of prison, Alameida said. But the number of high-security, violent inmates continues to climb.

He disputed opponents' argument that the department can simply add staff and change procedures to change a medium-security cell into a



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maximum-security cell. And he defended the department's security classification system as "pretty darn good," citing a University of California, Los Angeles study.

Polanco was unconvinced, while subcommittee member Sen. Joseph Dunn, D-Santa Ana, said he is concerned the state can't afford a new prison while imposing massive budget cuts elsewhere. While the committee's vote stripped out only \$1 million in pre-construction money, Polanco said it will save hundreds of millions of dollars in future years.

The pair also voted to block Davis' proposal to shutter five of the state's nine private prisons housing 1,400 short-term inmates to save the state an estimated \$5 million a year, after hearing testimony from former inmates and community members.

Davis' plan to close the prisons was earlier supported by an Assembly budget subcommittee.

The five he wants to shut down by June 30 are Baker Community Correctional Facility east of Los Angeles; Eagle Mountain Community Correctional Facility in Riverside County; Leo Chesney Community Correctional Facility for Women in Live Oak, north of Sacramento; McFarland Community Correctional Facility in Kern County; and Mesa Verde Community Correctional Facility in Bakersfield.

Supporters of both subcommittee decisions portrayed them as victories over the powerful prison guards' union that has strongly backed Davis.

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