



Prison Watchdog 'Expected More' From Paterson

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Bob Gangi, executive director of the Correctional Association, a prison watchdog group chartered by the state Legislature in 1846, accused Gov. David Paterson of "folding" to the demands of the Senate Republicans by agreeing to keep open four prisons and at least two of six juvenile detention centers slated for closure by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer due to declining populations.

Gangi called upstate prisons "an economic development program built on the backs of the poor," adding:

"This is business as usual in the worst sense. As minority leader, (Paterson) always closely identified with issues related to imprisonment. He was a strong proponent of reforming the Rockefeller Drug Laws. It's fair to expect more from him on this issue...We thought his conscience would trump his political considerations."

Aside from the fact that the overwhelming majority of offenders in the state prison system are low-income people of color - a constituency that Paterson represented when he was a senator from Harlem - Gangi and other advocates are disappointed that the new governor did not follow the proposals made by his predecessor, who was more of a law-and-order man (except, of course, when it came to himself).

What's equally baffling, Gangi added, is the fact that closing the four prisons alone could result in a savings of \$44 million in operating dollars and \$30 million worth of capital spending over two fiscal years at a time when the state is facing a more than \$4 billion deficit and a financial picture that seems to worsen by the day.

Gangi predicted that his organization would not be the only one taking aim at Paterson on this issue.

In addition, not a few African American lawmakers were grumbling about this last night in the Assembly chamber - although no one wanted to go on the record. The feeling was that the new governor had knuckled under to the Senate majority in his desperation to get an on-time (or, at this point, nearly on-time) budget.