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## Prison guards rally at Capitol

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By PETER CROWLEY, Enterprise Managing Editor and GEORGE EARL, Enterprise Staff Writer

ALBANY — Among the nearly 1,000 corrections officers who rallied on the steps of the Capitol Monday was a contingent of 18 from Camp Gabriels. They, like the rest, were celebrating despite the rain that blended with sleet and snow as the temperature dropped.

Although no one at the rally said it explicitly — including lawmakers, who had reason to boast about it — the state Senate had reportedly convinced Gov. David Paterson the day before to keep open four prisons that previous Gov. Eliot Spitzer's administration had planned to close.

Rick Gonyea, of Vermontville, had gotten a personal call from his state senator, Betty Little, the night before. Little, R-Queensbury, said Gonyea was one of three people from Camp Gabriels she told the news to as she drove home from Albany Sunday. He had asked her for an update, and she had a big one for them.

"After we got the call last night from the senator, my wife broke down in tears," Gonyea said. "It was the best phone call I ever got."

Gonyea is retired as a corrections officer at Camp Gabriels, but his wife still works there as the acting nurse administrator. If the prison closed, he said, they probably would have to transfer to another prison and leave the area. Therefore, the outgoing man who once rallied support for a Wal-Mart Supercenter in Saranac Lake has made saving Camp Gabriels his next community activism task.

The rally, organized by the New York State Corrections Officers and Police Benevolent Association, was full of thunderous cheers from corrections officers and strident statements by lawmakers, but no one came right out and said the four prisons — the others are Hudson, Pharsalia and McGregor — would stay open. That's because it's not a done deal until the budget is approved, which is expected to happen later this week. Nevertheless, Little's staff said the governor and the Assembly have agreed with the Senate and committed to keep the prisons open.

"The bride and groom are waiting at the altar; they just haven't tied the knot yet," Little's spokesman Dan MacEntee said.

Assembly Minority Leader James Tedisco, R-Schenectady, came the closest of any of the rally speakers to assuring that the prisons would stay open. He said Paterson told him he would keep the prisons open this year.

Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno, R-Brunswick, got the biggest hollers at the rally. As he approached the Capitol steps, the throng of corrections officers standing on them chanted, “Bruno! Bruno! Bruno!” They repeated the chant after he spoke, and one even yelled audibly, “Bruno for governor!”

“Our crime rate is down,” Bruno said. “Why is it down? Because we’re putting people away and not letting them hurt others.

“You are doing life-saving work.”

Spitzer had initiated a study of the state’s prison needs shortly after he became governor in January 2007. This January, his administration announced that, based on that study, it would close the four prisons. Crime is down, inmate numbers are down, and Spitzer said closing prisons would save money.

MacEntee said the Spitzer administration never shared the study’s findings and never answered questions about double-bunking to the satisfaction of the Senate’s Republican majority. The Spitzer administration had pointed out that only about half of Camp Gabriels’ beds are full, but corrections officers and Republican lawmakers countered that inmates had been double-bunked in rooms designed for one inmate each, so dropping down to “half” capacity actually meant it was still full.

“What happens the next time — and there will be a next time — we have a crack epidemic?” Sen. Michael Nozzolio, R-Seneca Falls, chairman of the Senate Crime Victims, Crime and Correction Committee, said at the rally. “They’ll be double-bunked, they’ll be stuffed into the medians, and we’ll have another prison riot on our hands.”

Several speakers described Spitzer’s prison-closure plan as “ill-advised.” Kenneth Brynien, president of the Public Employees Federation, a union that represents some prison workers, said “there is a better way” for the state to save money. He suggested two alternatives: First, “The wealthy taxpayers of this state could pay their fair share,” and second, the state should stop wasting money contracting out for jobs that state employees can do. These steps would be worth billions of dollars, he said, whereas, by comparison, closing prisons “will save pennies.”

Little, for her part, thanked the corrections officers for their work.

“Every time I go into a facility, whether it’s a maxi-max or a minimum, I’m always impressed with the work that you do — and dangerous work,” she said.”

The facts that had caused the state Department of Correctional Services to recommend the prison closings have not changed, said DOCS spokesman Eric Chris. The closures

would have saved taxpayers \$33.5 million annually in operating costs beginning in 2009, plus nearly \$30 million by avoiding prison capital expenditures, according to Chris.

“We are entering a new era in New York state corrections where the trends are clear: declining prison population (resulting in part from a sustained, overall drop in crime) but increasing treatment and services for our mentally ill inmates and sex offenders,” DOCS Commissioner Brian Fischer stated on his Web site.

“We think that restoring funding to the four prisons is a misguided step,” said Robert Gangi, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York, an independent, nonprofit prison watchdog group. “It is past time for New York State to reduce the capacity of the prison system and to redirect resources for rehabilitation, and thereby keeping more people out of prisons. This will achieve three things: core cost saving to state government, a more just and humane prison system, and safer communities. We are going to focus our attention on educating the public and pressing state policy makers to reverse this decision either before the end of this legislative session or next year’s budget,” Gangi said.

The focus at Camp Gabriels is now on increasing services and using the prison to full capacity, according to Mike Facteau, sector steward for the NYSCOPBA corrections officers’ union at Camp Gabriels. He noted that the minimum-security prison is primarily a rehabilitation facility, focused on inmates re-entering society. Camp Gabriels is underutilized, with 193 of the 323 rooms currently occupied by inmates, he said.

“A new impact study commission through the Legislature and governor’s office is now being formed to make more rational decisions on who they close down, instead of making rush decisions,” Facteau said.

### **Also in the budget**

After the rally, MacEntee said saving Camp Gabriels may be one of the only good things the North Country gets out of the state budget. Schools should get more aid, but counties and hospitals will probably get less, and things are not looking good for a loan-repayment plan to lure doctors to rural upstate communities, members of Little’s staff said.

Matt Anderson, a spokesman for the state Budget Division, said, “A 2 percent cut in all state agency funding has drawn broad support in Albany.

“The budget is in the process of being closed down,” Anderson said. “We will find a fiscally responsible way to balance the budget.”