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GEO Group withdraws proposed prison project from Stroud

*Prison supporters placing some of the blame
on Lincoln County Commissioners*

By DANA HILL

Staff Writer

According to information being circulated by some pro-prison supporters this week, a proposal to construct a prison facility in Stroud is no longer in the works. *The Lincoln County News* placed several calls to Stroud city officials, but no confirmation could be made regarding the prison because calls were not returned.

In a widely circulated e-mail written by Sandy Jones, Stroud City Manager Steve Gilbert's mother, she claims GEO advised city officials that a smear campaign started by the anti-prison people and a total lack of support from Lincoln County Commissioners, who kept the prison off their agenda last week, was the

final blow.

The e-mail letter said the location of the prison was going to be the John Cassidy property, south of Stroud. It said GEO was self-financing, meaning they would pay ad valorem taxes, and the schools would be getting thousands of dollars off the prison.

"This was to be announced in the paper next week," the letter stated. "The city was annexing in the Cassidy property so the town would get utility revenues and the prison would help redo the water plant so we could provide water to them."

According to the chairman of the Lincoln County Board of Commissioners, Stroud city officials wanted the county commis-

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sioners to approve the location of the prison.

"There is a state statute that says if a private prison is going to be located in the county, then county commissioners must approve it and if it will be within city limits, the city council of that community must approve it," Ricky Taylor said. "This is not a county issue and the location could be approved by the Stroud City Council. All it had to do was annex it into the city, which it planned to do anyway."

In her letter, Jones said when the commission would not lift a finger to help Stroud, it was the final blow that killed the prison deal. She said "Don't forget the lack of support by our county commissioners at election time, District 1, our district, set up for reelection in November. Perhaps we should speak up at the ballot box."

Jones said instead of building a facility in Stroud, GEO is going to expand, again, their facility in Lawton.

"Not getting this prison is a huge loss for Stroud," Jones said in her letter. "The blame for costing this

should land right in the lap of those anti-prison people, costing us jobs, money for the school, sales tax to the city and county, and worse yet, probably the mall project which was tied to the prison coming. They came because of the prison project."

Terry Moore, managing partner of the Garrett Moore Company, whose project is The Shops at Tatanka Hills Retail Center, said the mall project is in no way connected to the prison project. He said all they knew about the proposed prison project is that it was going to be three or four miles outside of town.

About being tied to the prison project, partner Ed Waters said, "Why would it be, those prisoners can't shop."

Moore said the company has increased the size of the project from its original 250,000 square feet to 330,000 square feet.

Tuesday morning, Brian Stevens, acting county commissioner for District No. 1, received several telephone calls and a letter from the pro-prison committee. They were not nice, he added.

The letter Stevens received says, "The committee wants to personally thank you for what you did not

do for Stroud. As an acting county commissioner working in our district you should have supported Stroud regarding the prison issue. Instead we hear not only were you supporting the prison project to go to a vote in November (which would automatically cause the prison to go away, because they were not going to wait around till November) but you also didn't speak up at the last county commissioner's meeting on behalf of the residents of Stroud, where you serve."

The letter further stated that the Stroud City Attorney had carried materials to the DA's office in Chandler to be put on the agenda, it was passed on to the commissioners and (Stroud's) city manager sat through the whole meeting and it was never mentioned.

Gilbert was at the meeting and there was not an agenda item about the prison project. During the time for new business, Gilbert was asked if he had anything to say and he said he did not.

The letter from the pro-prison committee went on to say they have approximately 700 voters who have signed their petitions and were in favor of the prison.

"We feel very strong about your negative attitude and lack of support

toward Stroud. We are now circulating e-mails letting all know what happened. In addition we are calling those who do not have e-mails, so we will be sure to reach all our support community. They will return your favor at the polls in November, that is provided you win the primary," the letter said.

The letter also said, "Stroud certainly doesn't need a county commissioner who will not stand up and support his district and county. So I wouldn't bother putting up many signs, as our votes will be going to your opponent. A word to the wise, in the future you might be more selective as to whose yards you place your signs in, not that it really matters now. Nothing like shooting yourself in the foot."

Steve and Kim Beck, who have been outspoken against the proposed prison project, said they are pleased that the GEO Group has announced the decision to proceed with expanding their operations in Lawton, Oklahoma rather than building the proposed facility in Stroud.

"While we understand there is a potential economic benefit to the community of Stroud due to the sale of utilities, etc., research also shows the real possibility of economic downturn after locating a prison in

a rural community like Stroud," the Becks said. "This, coupled with the quality of life concerns we shared with many, led us to our opinion that a prison was not a chance for positive development, rather quite the opposite."

The Becks said their goal from the beginning was for Stroud citizens to have a voice in such a large decision for the community, the outcome of which would be permanent. They said city leadership denied the request for a vote which left them with the option of filing an Initiative Petition, allowing a vote of the people as afforded by Oklahoma law.

"We have filed the completed Initiative Petition with the Stroud City Clerk and will work to get the question on a ballot in November, even with the news of GEO's withdrawal from the Stroud community," the Becks said. "The November vote will hopefully prevent a repeat of the strife our city has endured in recent months."

The Becks said they are ready to stand behind their city leaders on the possibilities which lie ahead for the community.

"We ask that our city leaders commit to accelerating the healing which is needed in Stroud," they said. "Any other path can only lead to unnecessary strife."