



Corrections "circus"

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If only we'd attended Mike Hawker's 7 a.m. budget subcommittee meetings ...

At today's Legislative Budget and Audit Committee meeting, where lawmakers decided to go ahead with an investigation into the staffing ratios in the Department of Corrections (with an expansion of the probe likely to include allegations of a staph infection outbreak), Rep. Hawker talked about his dissatisfaction over five years as head of the House finance subcommittee on corrections.

As Hawker explained, he had a hard time getting a quorum at the pre-crack of dawn, and no one paid attention, and it has been "particularly frustrating."

He contrasted that with the "media circus" now under way following the no-confidence vote by unionized corrections officers against Commissioner Joe Schmidt.

Of course, in years one through three of Hawker's tenure, Schmidt was not commissioner, and it's only in year five that there's a no-confidence vote.

It's interesting that Hawker describes the current situation as a "circus." There has been pretty moderate coverage of the issues thus far, it seems to me.

I guess it shows how lonely those early morning budget hearings have been, lacking, as they must have, the fire-eater, bearded lady, sword-swallower, hoop-jumping tigers and trapeze artists.

The new tussle over Corrections has given us the prison smackdown version of Lyda vs. Sarah.

Senate President Lyda Green says that the alleged overcrowding and health concerns won't be alleviated as soon as they should be because the Palin administration isn't moving fast enough on a new Mat-Su prison.

Green would like to know "why there has been stone-walling on that for the last couple of years.

"And we're now two years behind the time we were, literally, two years ago. And very discouraging, and it does not allow for us to make any improvements or changes to the prison system."

Corrections officials say that's completely off-base. They say they're on pace for the borough to select a winning bidder for the design-build contract by October, with bonds issued in November and construction to begin next spring, with completion of the 1,536-bed facility in 2012.

Meanwhile, legislators are alleging, with no documentation as of yet, that the Palin administration will make your paycheck transparent if you complain about conditions in the Department of Corrections.

Hawker wants legislative hearings to put people on the record. "When someone has testified in front of the Legislature, if they are punitively, if punitive actions are taken against them, there is a very clear record of setting up a grievance that would have, I think, horrific consequences for those who perpetrated the punitive actions, on the part of supervisors."

"Horrific"? What, we're going to waterboard them? (Or, better yet, make them attend 7 a.m. meetings of the

finance subcommittee on corrections?)

Rep. Mike Kelly, R-Fairbanks, suggested that the Legislature should tread carefully in getting involved in a union-management issue, particularly in an election year. Sen. Johnny Ellis, D-Anchorage, called those comments "unfortunate," and noted that Sen. Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, who says he's hearing from aggrieved corrections officers, isn't up for re-election this year.



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