

Hobart Community, Nov 21, 2013

HOBART | Protesters opposed to any plans by GEO Group Inc. to build a detention center on the city's west side made their point loud and clear at Wednesday's City Council meeting. The protesters, who packed the meeting room, included members of Friends of Robinson Lake, Concerned Citizens of Crete and Frank Smith, a self-described "good government activist" who lives in Kansas. Hobart resident Bob Krebs said a prison doesn't fit in with the city's friendly image. "This is not a good fit," Krebs said. Smith, who has been involved with opposition to the private prison system for the past 17 years, voiced his concerns about any proposal from GEO Group. "I'm very concerned with the proposal that has been cooking for the last year. It's not healthy for the community, and I've done plenty of research that shows the detrimental effects to the community and the terrible consequences," Smith said. Concetta Smart, a member of Concerned Citizens of Crete, said her group in the Illinois village was successful in shooting down similar plans by Corrections Corporation of America last year. "Don't waste your time talking to GEO. Do something nice with the property," Smart said. Mayor Brian Snedecor and other city officials thanked the protesters for attending and expressing their views. "I understand the concerns of the residents," Snedecor said. He and other officials said the protests are premature because no formal proposal or plans have come before the city from GEO. Snedecor said he had discussed informally a proposal earlier this year with GEO officials that entailed a facility where immigrants would be brought before a court and then possibly detained for a short time. The immigrants, depending on the outcome of their hearing, then would be processed. Snedecor, who previously had said he was unaware of the Nov. 4 sale on the day it occurred, said any plans for the property would have to be approved by the Hobart Plan Commission and other city officials before going forward. Snedecor, citing confidentiality, also previously said he couldn't comment on GEO or any other group showing prior interest in the former St. Sava property. There were email correspondence and discussions between GEO and some city officials, including City Council members, over the past year, according to a Nov. 18 letter City Attorney Anthony DeBonis sent to Smith. Smith received a response from DeBonis after he filed an access to public records request with the city. Merrillville attorney John Bushemi earlier this month confirmed GEO Group had bought the former St. Sava property, but said there are no immediate plans to build a detention center there. Bushemi serves as local legal counsel for GEO, a company that builds and operates correctional and detention facilities around the world. A source close to the project told The Times that GEO plans to eventually build a detention center to process illegal immigrants. The sale of the 40 acres of land owned by Bear Country Park took place on the morning of Nov. 4, Hobart resident Larry Brown said. Brown is a managing member and one of five partners comprising Bear Country Park. The property is east of Interstate 65 near Robinson Lake. Bear Country Park owners — including Brown, Matt Butkus, Rudy Sutton, John Stofko and Louis Gerodemos — put the former St. Sava property up for sale in November 2010. Brown said developers gave up on plans to develop it and Robinson Lake after they lost city officials' backing.