

Deerfield Correctional Center

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Whitmer nixes private immigrant detention center proposed in Ionia

LANSING — Gov. Gretchen Whitmer has canceled the sale of a former state prison in Ionia for construction of a \$35-million immigration detention center — a move drawing both praise and criticism. Whitmer nixed the sale of the former Deerfield Correctional Center to Immigration Centers of America, a private detention center operator based in Virginia, because the company couldn't guarantee the facility "would not be used to detain adults who had been separated from their children or other family members," among other concerns, said Whitmer spokeswoman Tiffany Brown. It's the latest in a series of moves that Whitmer, a Democrat, has taken to reverse directions taken under the administration of her predecessor, Republican Gov. Rick Snyder. Rev. Jack Eggleston, a board member of the group Michigan United and pastor at Unity Lutheran Church in Southgate, said the center would have made it easier for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to separate families. "We applaud ... Whitmer for standing up for immigrant families today, and standing against the private prison industry," Eggleston said in a news release. But state Rep. Thomas Albert, R-Lowell, called the governor's action "heavy-handed," and said it came days before the sale of the land was to be finalized. Albert said Whitmer was halting the sale as a way of taking a political swipe at Republican President Donald Trump, who has been fire for separating parents from children at the U.S.-Mexico border and last week declared a national emergency in an attempt to secure funding to construct a border wall. "I would really like to know what the governor's plan is to bring 250 well-paying jobs to Ionia and how she plans to clean up the long-vacant former prison property," Albert said in a news release. The Free Press broke the news of the proposed private immigration detention center in October after the Michigan Land Bank Fast Track Authority called for bids on the former state prison, which closed in 2009. Immigration Centers of America (ICA), which operates a similar civil detention facility in Virginia, was the sole bidder, and Dennis Muchmore, who served as chief of staff to Snyder from 2011 through early 2016, was acting as a lobbyist for the detention center company, the Free Press reported. Muchmore or another company spokesman could not immediately be reached for comment. Because it would involve only adult civil detention, the 166,000-square-foot facility would house immigrants detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) who have not been charged with or convicted of criminal offenses, but instead are being held pending administrative hearing on issues such as deportation. Though Muchmore said the development could be "a long way away," a copy of the company's Oct. 1 proposal, obtained by the Free Press, said that if the land sale was approved, the facility expected to receive its permit from the federal government late in 2019 and open 12 months after that. Brown said that when Whitmer took office in January, she launched "a thoughtful and deliberative review" of the green light given to the sale under the Snyder administration late last year. The review included input from local elected officials, community leaders, civil rights groups, and the company, she said. "From that due diligence, it was determined that ICA was unable to agree to terms that guaranteed that this facility would not be used to detain adults who had been separated from their children or other family members and could not assure certain other conditions without ICE approval," Brown said. "The governor believes that building more detention facilities won't solve our immigration crisis, and she also believes that separating families doesn't reflect our Michigan values, Brown said. "It's time for President Trump and Congress to work together on a bipartisan immigration reform plan that keeps communities safe, protects American jobs, and keeps families together." But Albert said Whitmer shouldn't have taken the decision away from city officials in Ionia. "The sale of this blighted property has been in the works for well over a year," he said. "It's obvious the governor's rejection was about appeasing her political base and taking a swipe at President Trump," he said. "Like it or not, people that come into this country illegally are going to be detained. Ionia has been a correctional community since the mid-1800s. They deserve to have been involved in this decision." But Michigan United, a statewide coalition that works on

issues related to immigration, housing and rights for low-wage workers, said that by law, undocumented immigrants taken into custody by ICE in Detroit must be held within 150 miles. Ionia is at the far end of that limit, being 143 miles away from Detroit, the group said. "Not only would a new prison anywhere in Michigan make it easier for ICE to tear families apart, one so far away would also make it harder for their lawyers to work with them, harder for their families to come visit them and much harder for the community to rally in their support," Michigan United said in the news release. Whitmer issued an executive order on the environment that among other changes abolished industry-dominated panels set up under Snyder to review proposed environmental rules and permits. The Republican-controlled Legislature voted last week to reject that executive order, and Whitmer's next move in the dispute is expected early this week. Whitmer has also sought to halt a proposed Enbridge Line 5 oil pipeline tunnel under the Straits of Mackinac approved under Snyder and is seeking to block some controversial grants that were part of a \$1.3-billion supplemental spending plan approved by lawmakers on the last day of the lame-duck session in December and signed into law by Snyder.