

Untitled document

By Barbara Tetreault

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BERLIN – New Hampshire's Congressional delegation has not given up on getting the federal prison activated this summer.

U.S. Senator Kelly Ayotte and U.S. Congressman Charlie Bass have now joined U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen in writing to federal officials, urging them to find money to open the prison now.

Ayotte is also asking the Department of Justice to waive the maximum 37-year age limit for law enforcement jobs at the Berlin facility to allow former mill workers to compete for them.

Bass and Ayotte pointed out construction of the prison is completed but it remains vacant because Congress has not appropriated funding to activate the facility.

"Through no fault of the Bureau of Prisons, the last Congress failed to pass a budget and failed to pass a single appropriations bill, choosing instead to run departments and agencies on a series of short-term continuing resolutions that failed to take into account the Bureau's new priorities for the fiscal year," wrote Ayotte.

"It is unfortunate this brand-new federal prison in Berlin is sitting vacant right now because Congress couldn't do its job and pass a budget or any of the spending bills last year," Bass agreed.

Both sent letters to Assistant Director of the Bureau of Prisons William Dalius urging the bureau to redirect funds in its current fiscal year to activate the new prison. Ayotte also sent letters to Acting BOP Director Thomas Kane and Attorney General Eric Holder.

Ayotte and Bass said they will be working to ensure funding for the prison is in next year's budget. But, they asked Dalius to look for funding that might become available in the current fiscal year to get the prison open now.

The two stressed the economic importance of the federal prison to the North Country.

"FCI Berlin is estimated to create 320-340 urgently needed jobs and inject \$40 million annually into the economically distressed North Country of New Hampshire. Once operational, FCI Berlin will be the only federal correctional facility throughout Northern New England," Ayotte said.

Construction of the facility was completed last fall and a warden has been hired and is on-site. The pair noted it is costing the bureau \$4 million annually to maintain the empty prison at a time when there is overcrowding in the nation's prisons. Ayotte said last year the bureau's prison population was 37 percent overcrowded.

Ayotte also asked the Bureau of Prisons to review the current law that most people hired to work in the prison can not be older than 37 when initially hired with few exceptions.

"In the special case of FCI Berlin, employing workers older than the current maximum age requirement is essential to the success of the prison, recovery of the local economy, and strengthening of the community," she wrote.

The prison was scheduled to start hiring correctional officers this spring but the compromise fiscal 2011 budget passed by Congress did not include funds to activate the prison.

U.S. Senate Jeanne Shaheen sent a similar letter last month to Department of Justice Deputy Attorney General James Cole, asking him to prioritize funding to include opening the Berlin prison. Shaheen also appeared on NBC News to publicize the \$247 million prison sitting empty because of a lack of funding.