

Untitled document

By Barbara Tetreault

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BERLIN – An Obama administration proposal to use federal Bureau of Prison funds to purchase a vacant prison in Illinois has drawn the attention of New Hampshire's Second District Congressman Charlie Bass. In a letter to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, Bass said he is opposed to the proposal because he fears diverting money from the bureau could impact the on-going activation of the federal prison in Berlin.

"After an unnecessary and costly delay, Congress was finally able to come together last year and approve and prioritize funding for the activation of the new prison in Berlin, which had been sitting empty for far too long. Not only will this prison help to alleviate overcrowding in the federal prison system, it will be a tremendous economic boon to the North Country," Bass wrote.

The congressman said he opposes the administration moving forward on any proposal that could put the activation of the Berlin prison and three other new prisons in jeopardy.

Construction of the \$276 million medium security prison in Berlin was completed in November 2010. But the facility sat empty for a year while Congress debated over appropriating the money to open and operate the 1,280-bed medium security prison. The money was appropriated at the end of last year and the activation is underway. Last month, Warden Debra Schult said 40 percent of the 341 employees who will work at the prison have been hired. The first group of minimum security inmates is expected to arrive within a month.

The Obama administration wants to purchase the Thomson Correctional Center in Thomson, Ill., which the state built in 2001 and never used. The administration first proposed using the facility to house foreign detainees being held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Facing opposition, the administration said it would use the site to reduce overcrowding the federal prison system.

To pay the agreed-upon \$165 million purchase price, Holder proposed re-programming money already allocated including \$14 million from the BOP appropriation.

While the administration's proposal has the support of Illinois officials, it has been rejected by the powerful chair of the House subcommittee that oversees the bureau. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA) wrote that he did not trust the administration not to use the facility to house detainees.

Bass Spokeswoman Stephanie DuBois said the congressman wanted to make sure the administration knew he has concerns about the impact diverting the funds could have on the four prisons currently being activated including the Berlin facility.

"We want to make sure the Attorney General realizes the impact a proposal like this could have on the prisons being activated like Berlin," DuBois said.

