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HOBART — City residents and activists from throughout the region and the Midwest packed the City Council meeting Wednesday to voice opposition to a possible immigrant processing center at the former St. Sava church property and the company that might build and operate it, citing humanitarian, environmental and economic reasons. Activists started banding together after it was discovered that the acreage adjacent to Robinson Lake Park was purchased by The GEO Group, a Boca Raton, Fla.-based builder and operator of private prisons and immigrant detention centers. Frank Smith, an activist from Kansas who has been following The GEO Group and other private prison operators for more than a decade, told the council he was concerned that the city has known that The GEO Group was looking at the property for about a year, but the public seems to have been unaware of the discussions. "I've seen this happen town after town," said Smith, who said he has plenty of evidence of how these facilities become a detriment to a community that he could provide to city officials. Mayor Brian Snedecor said he and director of development Denarie Kane have had a few conversations with The GEO Group, both over the phone and in person. He said company officials have stopped by his office. City Attorney Anthony DeBonis said the first conversation he is aware of took place in February. Snedecor said the company officials mentioned some interest in setting up courtrooms in the Chicago area, where hearings would take place to determine the immigration status of an individual and whether that individual should return to their community or be deported. If they are deported, the individual would be transferred out of that facility, he said. "The individuals would be limited to a 28-day stay at the center," DeBonis said.

Snedecor and City Council members said, however, that no plan for this type of center or any other plans have been brought to city officials as of this date and any plan that is brought to them must go through the usual regulatory process and in public forums before it can be built. "At this time, there is nothing in concrete. I've seen no proposals and no agreements with the city. ... I'm astounded, personally, that they bought the land," DeBonis said of The GEO Group. Snedecor said he and Kane hear from 20 to 30 potential developers each week, many of which don't come to fruition. Resident Larry Brown, part of the Bear Country group that sold the property to The GEO Group, said the buyer was not disclosed in the sales contract. But those attending the meeting wanted to let city officials know what they could be getting into if they bring the Florida company in. Pat Wilmore, one of many members of the Friends of Robinson Lake attending the meeting, said she believes the Hobart Marsh plan will be wasted if the center is built. "Who's going to come with a prison there? Everything we've done will be for nothing," she said.

Tom DuBois, a 30-year resident and member of the Faith in Action Committee at First Unitarian Church in Hobart, said as a former steelworker, he is concerned from a union standpoint as well as an environmental one. "The real jobs from this would be in operations. Privatized services are usually nonunion paying about \$9 an hour," DuBois said. Paulie Garcia, of East Chicago, brought up the humanitarian aspect. "I want to convey what a deep stain this could bring to Hobart. This is hugely a family affair; families are being destroyed," he said of the immigration detention centers and the number of deportations taking place. Anthony Rayson, who helped to derail the opening of an immigrant detention center in his hometown, Crete, Ill., called the operators of private prisons and immigrant detention centers "the worst of Wall Street." "I'm trying to warn you that something bad could happen. More upscale businesses will start to leave and you'll get pawn brokers and pay day loan places that cater to people visiting families in these facilities," Rayson said. He called immigration reform a huge social problem in this country. "President Obama deports twice as many immigrants as (President) Bush did. More than 400,000 immigrants are deported each year, creating an awful family situation. It's tearing away at the fabric of all kinds of communities," he said. Resident William "Bob" Krebes said he welcomes the advice of others who've had experience with these facilities and companies. "The reason we came here is that Hobart is a nice town. For some reason, a prison doesn't seem to fit that image. This is not a good fit for the image of Hobart," Krebes said.