

Mar 12, 2020 delcotimes.com

### **GEO asks to exit prison operations by Dec. 31**

MEDIA — The GEO Group Inc. has asked Delaware County to set Dec. 31 as the date for the privately run 1,883-inmate George W. Hill Correctional Facility to return to county-controlled operations. "We understand the desire by this board to transition the facility to public operations," J. David Donahue, senior vice president, GEO Secure Services Division, said to the county Jail Oversight Board on Tuesday. "We understand the desire ... We propose a Dec. 31, 2020 transition date to assist in the completion of that exercise." The facility has been under private operation since 1998 and GEO signed a five-year, \$264 million contract with the then-county Board of Prison Inspectors to run the facility. In January, the Jail Oversight Board replaced the Board of Prison Inspectors. Private operation of the county facility has come under increasing scrutiny by public officials and community members. For example, county Councilman and Jail Oversight Board Chair Kevin Madden previously stated, "The idea of a private, for-profit prison is a broken model." With that in mind, Donahue told the board Tuesday about a transition back to the county, "We want you to understand we will work cooperatively with the county. We want to do everything we can to ensure a smooth transition." Madden said he appreciated Donahue's attendance and understood the company's need for an exit date. "I've heard you loud and clear about the need for there to be some clear concept around the time frame," Madden said, "and I do appreciate your desires to be a constructive partner to ensure a smooth and orderly transition." Board member and Common Pleas Court Judge John Whelan asked if a study had been completed about what it would take for the county to regain control, particularly as that relates to the employees needed there, the county's assumption of liabilities including the 49 lawsuits filed since the fall of 2019 and other costs associated with such a transition. "My concern is has the county looked at what needs to be done in order to take back the prison and all of the issues associated with taking back the prison," Whelan said, adding that December would come a lot faster than some may anticipate. "I'm not so sure this county would be prepared to take back the prison ... and I am optimistic that (GEO) will continue to operate the prison so long as the county needs you to operate the prison." Madden said the Dec. 31 date was first presented on Tuesday, adding, "That needs to be a two-way conversation." He said the state Department of Corrections is aware of the situation and that DOC Secretary John Wentzel is expected to tour the facility within the next few weeks as Madden agreed work does need to be done to ensure a safe and smooth transition. County Chief Administrative Officer Marianne Grace added, "It's very important for the county, and I know GEO would do this as well, that we do have a good plan in order to be able to reassume that responsibility." She said the safety of the inmates is critical, as is the staffing. "There's a lot of things that need to be looked at in terms of the county bringing the jail back under county management," Grace added. County Controller and county Oversight Board member Joanne Phillips agreed. "I would not support a transition unless we have all these things in place as you're talking about - safety, cost, the safety of our citizens as well, just the whole transition, the facility, the state of the facility, what responsibilities are under contract," she said. "I'm on the same page that this needs to be carefully considered."