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Lawsuit filed in a bid to block Alabama's prison lease plan

MONTGOMERY, ALA. Groups opposed to Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey's plan to lease private prisons filed a lawsuit Tuesday, arguing that the plan is illegal because it did not get approval from the state legislature among other things. Attorney Kenny Mendelson, of Montgomery, filed the lawsuit in Montgomery County Circuit Court on behalf of four plaintiffs — Republican State Auditor Jim Zeigler; Democratic state Rep. John Rogers, of Birmingham; Leslie Ogburn, a homeowner near the proposed prison site outside Tallassee and prisoner rights activist Rev. Kenny Glasgow of Dothan. The governor in February agreed to lease two mammoth prisons as a partial solution to the state's troubled correction system. The two 30-year lease agreements are with separate entities of CoreCivic, one of the nation's largest private prison companies. The governor's office is negotiating with another company to build a third prison in Bibb County. Ivey has said new prisons are a crucial first step to overhauling the state's troubled and aging prison system and that new facilities will be safer and enable more training and rehabilitative efforts. Critics said the \$3 billion plan is unnecessarily expensive and does not address critical issues of training, violence and understaffing. "This prison plan would be a 30-year mistake," Zeigler said. "It would force Alabama taxpayers to pay rents starting at \$94 million a year and going up to \$106 million. At the end of 30 years, the state would own equity in the prisons of zero. No equity. This is a bad business plan." The state auditor said the plan does not address problems such as the safety of staff and other inmates; overcrowding; mental health; suicide; recidivism; and inadequate job training. "The plan merely throws over \$3.6 billion of taxpayer money at the problems," Zeigler continued. "It's not just that we don't want these privately owned prisons in our backyard. It's that we don't want these prisons in anyone's backyard," Jackson McNeely, a resident of Brierfield in Bibb County and the founder of Block the Brierfield Prison, said in a statement. McNeely said. "these mega prisons are ill-conceived, irresponsible, and do nothing to address the problems that they allegedly intend to. Gina Maiola, a spokeswoman for Ivey, said the administration has not seen the lawsuit and could not comment. Ivey has said the new prisons are the cornerstone to improving the state's corrections system. "These new, state-of-the-art facilities will provide safer, more secure correctional environments that better accommodate inmate rehabilitation, enhance medical and mental health services, and improve the quality of life for all those who live and work in them," Ivey said. The U.S. Department of Justice had sued Alabama in December over prison conditions, saying the state is failing to protect male prisoners from inmate-on-inmate violence and excessive force at the hands of prison staff.