

Oct 28, 2020 koaa.com

Bent County leaders worry potential prison closure could devastate local economy It's because of a recently passed Colorado House bill

LAS ANIMAS, Colo. — Residents and leaders alike in one rural southeastern Colorado community say the state is one decision away from bankrupting their town. Now, they are hoping people will speak out, to keep it from happening. If you find yourself in the town of Las Animas, chances are you're either passing through or paying a visit to Bent County's largest economic driver. "It is Bent County's largest taxpayer as far as property tax goes, it's our largest municipal utility consumer, it's our largest employer," Bent Commissioner Chuck Netherton. "It" is the Bent County Correctional Facility. "It was built by the Bent County taxpayers in 1993," Netherton said. That was after the area's previous economic driver, a VA hospital, shut its doors. "Of course when it closed, our little town just kind of fell apart," Netherton said. "And that was why the citizens went together and we built the prison." Shortly after, the county sold it to a private company to run. and because of that, this little town, and its neighbors, are in danger of falling apart again. "That's the main talk of the town right now," he said. "Everybody is just really scared." It's all because of the recently passed Colorado House Bill 20-1019, which according to its summary, concerns "measures to manage the state prison population." But leaders in Bent County say it's aiming at doing one thing in particular. "This original bill was to close private prisons by the year 2025," Netherton said. That could mean, pending a feasibility study, the bent county correctional facility could be shuttered. Leaders lobbied the legislature, even met with Governor Jared Polis, who signed the bill into law, to seek compromise. "What the governor had told me is, he thought that the state would take it over," Netherton said. If that's the case, the state wouldn't have pay the county any property taxes. "There goes our million and a half out of our 4 point something million dollar budget," he said. Which leaves leaders with only one thing left to say. "I think my exact words were, he could be the first Governor in Colorado history to bankrupt two of the poorest counties in the state of Colorado," Netherton said. Tuesday night was supposed to be the first of two community feedback sessions as part of that feasibility study. Unfortunately, due to the state's new COVID-19 restrictions, that meeting had to be postponed.