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North Lake Correctional Facility to close in September

North Lake Correctional Facility is closing in September, according to a memo to employees obtained by the Daily News. The facility is a for-profit prison that houses non-U.S. citizens convicted of federal felonies and detainees, owned and operated by the GEO Group through a public-private partnership with the Federal Bureau of Prisons since reopening in 2019. The memo obtained by the Daily News, dated May 26, is titled "Notice of facility closure," and comes from facility administrator Michael Breckon. It states that the Federal Bureau of Prisons will end its contract at the North Lake Correctional Facility on Sept. 30. It attributes the closure to President Joe Biden's 2021 executive order that contracts not be renewed with for-profit prisons. "The BOP's decision to close this facility is not a reflection on the work done by our employees, but rather the result of President Biden's Jan. 26, 2021, executive order instructing the attorney general not to renew Department of Justice contracts with privately operated criminal detention facilities," the memo states. Following Biden's executive order in 2021, the Daily News filed a federal Freedom of Information Act request with the BOP seeking information about possible stipulations in the department's contract with GEO Group that would make it possible for the prison to close prior to the end of its contract, originally expected to last until 2029. The Daily News was told in February 2021 to expect a six-week delay in receiving a FOIA response. After multiple check-ins with the BOP, there has still been no response to the request, which was confirmed as received shortly after being submitted. In February 2021, the Daily News reported that President Biden's order "could impact" North Lake's contract, but no definitive confirmation was received, either from GEO Group or from the BOP. The Daily News reached out to both GEO Group and the Bureau of Prisons before running this story, but did not hear back by press time. Lake County Administrator Tobi Lake said the loss of the prison would be a "big hit," as it's the county's largest employer. Bill Huizenga, U.S. Representative for the 2nd Congressional District, which currently includes Baldwin, derided the executive order that resulted in the prison's reported, impending closure. "This a very real example of how the Biden's administration's failed policies hurt communities like Baldwin," Huizenga, R-Zeeland, wrote in a statement to the Daily News. "North Lake Correctional Facility helps keep the streets safe, creates good-paying jobs, and supports the local economy." He added that the decision to halt Department of Justice contracts with private prisons was "emblematic of Joe Biden's inability to properly address the crisis along our southern border." Huizenga did not respond to a request for comment from the Daily News about what, if anything, his office was doing to urge the BOP and DOJ to keep North Lake Correctional Facility going. GEO Group is also contesting the North Lake Correctional Facility's tax value, which would be an additional blow to the county's economy, according to Lake. "GEO is in the process right now with the township, county and school district, of going to the (State of Michigan) Tax Tribunal contesting their tax value," Lake said. "They're going to try to cut their value in half at a cost to the county of \$200,000 per year." Another document acquired by the Daily News confirms that GEO Group is petitioning the tribunal to "reduce the assessed and state equalized value of of (the facility) from \$34,006,500 to \$17,500,000 and order a refund with interest." The Michigan Tax Tribunal document lists GEO Group as the petitioner and Webber Township as the respondent. It's dated May 29, 2021, and goes on to state that the facility's "true cash value is excessive and does not reflect market values indicated by comparable sales." Lake said he believes that, if GEO Group is successful with the petition, it "might try to reduce (its tax value) even further." Lake said the loss of the prison will take its toll on the county, but added, "it's nothing we haven't been through before," referencing the facility's somewhat fraught history. The prison originally opened in 1998 and was closed and reopened several times. The prison operated for seven years housing Michigan's youth prisoners before being closed in October 2005. GEO Group spent millions of dollars to expand the facility, which originally cost about \$20 million, so it could house up to 1,580 inmates after the company reached an agreement to house California prisoners, who started arriving in 2011. GEO Group sought permission to house Michigan prisoners in 2013, but the state rejected the plan. The state later approved GEO Group housing prisoners from Vermont and Washington. The first prisoners from Vermont arrived at the prison in the summer of 2015, but the facility closed in 2017 when that contract ended, re-opening to protests from concerned citizens in 2019. There was additional concern about COVID-19 conditions and the ability of loved ones to reach prisoners housed in the facility.