

Jul 15, 2021 journalrecord.com

With-prison-vacant-hinton-faces-uncertain-future

When the price of crude oil nose-dived in the 1980s, this rural community halfway between El Reno and Weatherford was in trouble. Oil rig workers, once flush with cash and eager to spend, started leaving in droves. Hinton's population dropped 14% from 1980 to 1990. "We had more business than we could take care of," said Kenneth Doughty, a lifelong Hinton resident. "Then all of a sudden it went away." Unnerved, city leaders in 1987 formed the Hinton Economic Development Authority, a public trust tasked with attracting new businesses. After learning that Mustang's town council rejected a construction proposal from a private prison company, it did some research and grew convinced that a correctional facility bring jobs and tax revenue back to Hinton. In 1989, the trust issued public bonds to fund construction, and three years later the Great Plains Correctional Facility was opened. The prison, leased by private corrections company The G.E.O Group, has since housed tens of thousands of state and federal prisoners and generated tens of millions of dollars for Hinton. G.E.O. even added 1,400 beds in 2008. On the north side of Hinton along Interstate 40, construction of a Love's truck stop, two casinos and a Chevy dealership were made possible after the city used money generated from the prison to expand water line access. Closer to downtown, the town used prison revenue to invest in a new fire station and historical museum. But with the stroke of a pen this year, Hinton's prospects for growth took a significant hit. On Jan. 26 President Joe Biden signed an executive order directing the federal government to not renew private prison contracts. The Great Plains prison was vacated in late May as a result. Oklahoma lawmakers sent a letter to Biden asking him to reconsider, but their request fell on deaf ears. Shanon Pack, Hinton's town administrator, said he and other leaders started preparing for the worst immediately after Biden issued the order. Over the past six and a half years, the G.E.O. Group has paid Hinton about \$60,000 per month in utility fees and \$1.25 per day per prisoner. The town received its final payments last month. "I remember when we first learned of that executive order, just realizing how Hinton was going to be greatly affected by it, not just the prison but the whole town," Pack said, adding that Hinton will lose about \$1.5 million in annual revenue with the prison empty. Pack said the town won't fill two vacant positions in its police department. Local businesses likely will have to start making cuts, too, as many of the prison's 230 former employees move away. As new mandatory minimum sentencing laws took effect and drove up demand for prison beds in the 1980s, startup private corrections companies like CoreCivic and the G.E.O. Group saw opportunity, and it paid. By the late 1990s, 1 in 10 rural counties was home to a correctional facility. While the prison boom brought jobs to economically depressed areas and padded municipal budgets, it also sparked criticism among justice reform advocates and researchers. Critics of private prisons argued that creating a financial incentive to lock people up is unethical and that private facilities are more likely to cut corners on staffing, prisoner programs and medical care. The G.E.O. Group, a publicly traded company, generated \$2.47 billion in revenue and \$166 million in net income in 2019. Critics' suspicions were confirmed in a 2016 U.S. Department of Justice report that found federal contract prisons were more dangerous and less secure than comparable government-owned and operated facilities. The report prompted former President Barack Obama to issue an executive order phasing out some private prison use. The Trump administration later rescinded that. It's worth noting that the federal prison population has declined 27% over the past seven years. The criticism of private prisons doesn't add up for Hinton city leaders and residents, who argue the Great Plains facility was run just as well as, if not better than, any public facility. "I don't think we've ever had any issues with the prison as far as a negative impact on the town and the community," said Jason Garner, head of the Hinton Economic Development Authority. "Before COVID they would hold a town meeting every quarter and tell us how they were training the inmates out there and educating them. It was a real positive vibe out there." This isn't the first time the Great Plains Correctional Facility has sat empty. In 2010, the Arizona Department of Corrections moved 1,700 of its prisoners out of the prison after expanding its in-state space. The prison remained vacant for more than four years until The G.E.O. Group and the Federal Bureau of Prisons agreed to a contract in 2014. Pack and Garner said that idle period has given the city some idea of what to expect as it begins to lose revenue from the prison again. In the meantime, they said the G.E.O. Group will continue to maintain the facility and pitch it to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections and other government agencies. Unlike the federal government, states remain free to enter into private prison contracts. About 20% of Oklahoma's state prison population is housed at two private facilities. However, demand for prison bed space has dropped significantly over the past five years. In Oklahoma, the state prison population has dropped 17.5% just in the last two years. The state prison system was operating at 86% capacity on June 28, down from 105% in June 2019. Last month the DOC announced plans to close

the William S. Key Correctional Center in Fort Supply. A declining state prison population doesn't mean the Great Plains facility won't be repopulated. The Corrections Department could opt to close some older facilities and move prisoners and staff to Hinton. If the state went that route, it could elect to lease and operate the facility, as it does with the CoreCivic-owned North Fork Correctional Facility in Sayre. The prison's closure hasn't stopped life in Hinton. The town's two casinos lure people traveling on nearby Interstate 40. The Red Rock Canyon Adventure Park also is a draw. But if Hinton's largest employer and revenue generator doesn't return, Doughty envisions a reality similar to what the town faced 35 years ago. "I think we'll survive, but I don't know that we'll thrive," he said. Oklahoma Watch is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that produces in-depth and investigative content on a wide range of issues facing the state. For more Oklahoma Watch content, go to oklahomawatch.org.