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Editorial: Taxpayers deserve more serious efforts to control Corrections costs

The Detroit News

State Senate Republicans have a plan to cut prison spending. The proposal would downsize the Corrections Department to an extent, but it won't slice a big enough chunk out of the department's \$2 billion budget, which contributes mightily to Michigan's mushrooming deficit.

Their plan would cut spending through such measures as farming out health care to medical students, requiring competitive bids for purchases and having church groups work with inmates.

This apparently is the GOP's alternative to reforms contained in Gov. Jennifer Granholm's 2010 budget proposal. She calls for additional prison closings -- resulting from the release of 3,500 inmates who've served beyond their minimum sentences -- and 1,000 Corrections Department job cuts. All of that leads to a relatively modest \$120 million in savings.

If these are seen as competing plans, we're in for more partisan bickering. We're awash in deficit billions, and policymakers are squabbling over the cost-cutting equivalent of coffee cans to bail us out.

Granholm's proposals are in line with a set of recommendations from the Pew Center on the States, released in January after a year of study. Pew Center researchers noted that 12,000 of Michigan's 48,500 inmates have served an average of 127 percent of their minimum sentences. They said we should try to prune that to 120 percent.

Researchers also pointed out that absent policy changes, Michigan can look forward to another \$600 million hike in its corrections budget during the next two years.

Unfortunately, their recommendations offer just \$262 million in savings, which would take six years to realize. And most or all of the savings are to be plowed back into rehabilitating criminals and putting more cops in high-crime areas.

Not that theirs is a bad plan. We should adopt the ideas for whatever economy and social benefit they yield. We also should buy into Senate Republican proposals to shrink the corrections bureaucracy. And we should give a listen to Rep. Alma Wheeler Smith, D-South Lyon, who says we can quickly cut another \$9 million by sending the feds 156 of our inmates

who are under deportation orders.

When it comes to saving money on a prison system that has grown beyond our funding capacity, there shouldn't be either-or propositions. The remedy for rising prison costs should be all of the above.

But even taken together, these measures fall short.

We've seen no public discussion of a proposal to save big money by revising state sentencing guidelines, which comes from the Detroit Regional Chamber. The chamber -- hardly a soft-on-crime group -- says shortening sentences by an average of 12 months would save us \$400 million

That's the kind of dramatic cut our elected officials should be looking for. It's time for them to stop playing political games and get serious about trimming corrections spending down to a size we can afford.

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