



English

We can't afford Whitman's prison plan

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For someone who made her fortune in cyberspace, Meg Whitman seems unusually enamored of ambitious bricks-and-mortar endeavors. In 2002, the eBay magnate donated \$30 million to her alma mater (and mine), Princeton, to help fund a new undergraduate dormitory. Five years and \$136 million later, Princeton celebrated the grand opening of Whitman College. This state-of-the-art complex combines a medieval castle ambience straight out of Harry Potter with high-speed wireless and a digital photo lab.

Now that she's running for governor of California, Whitman is proposing another construction project. But this time, she won't be footing the bill -- no, that honor will fall upon California's already overburdened taxpayers. Look closely at Whitman's platform and you'll find a troubling plank: A proposal to build new prisons. Or, as she puts it on her website: "We need more prison beds to keep our streets safe."

On the surface, Whitman's proposal may seem appealing. California's prisons are grossly overcrowded, with men sleeping in triple bunks or two to a 48-square-foot cell. But I have yet to hear Whitman explain how the state is going to pay for new prisons, despite her claim to value fiscal responsibility.

It's safe to say that Whitman's prisons would not feature anything like the amenities of Whitman College. Nevertheless, it costs a lot more to build even a bare-bones prison than to build even the most lavish dormitory. When California nearly tripled its prison population in the 1980s and '90s, building 23 new prisons at prices of up to \$350 million each, it funded construction by floating bonds -- that is, by saddling future Californians with debt.

Even if California could locate a few hundred million dollars, those funds would be much better spent on criminal justice policy reform. Unless Whitman is planning to literally double the size of the prison system, which seems unlikely, her proposal amounts to a drop in the bucket. California's prisons aren't just a little bit crowded -- they're operating at almost 200 percent of capacity. Building a new prison here or there will just delay the inevitable.

California must confront the roots of its prison crisis: draconian sentencing laws, a paucity of mental health treatment both in and out of prison, and a system that is too quick to return ex-offenders to prison for technical parole violations.

Whitman suggests that downsizing California's prison system -- as the state is under federal court order to do -- would harm public safety. But that's a myth. Several states, including New York, have shrunk their prison populations in recent years while also reducing crime rates. In contrast, our bloated prison system is actually a grave threat to public safety: Criminology experts agree that California's warehouse-like prisons fuel crime. The majority of our inmates do not participate in rehabilitative programming, whether it is substance abuse treatment, vocational training, literacy classes or GED preparation.

But that doesn't mean California inmates aren't learning. After touring California's prisons, the former head of Washington's prison system described them as "crime schools." Yolo

County's former chief probation officer, Don Meyer, has said of the prisons he's visited that "almost nothing positive is going on ... it seems like they produce additional criminal behavior." California's practice of cycling parolees in and out of prison for a few months at a time helps prison gangs reach their tentacles out into our communities.

In the face of all this evidence, Whitman wants to expand California's criminogenic, counterproductive prison system. In other words, she proposes to keep doing what California's been doing for the past 30 years. The Golden State already spends more on its prisons than its once-legendary public universities. Now, with California's colleges raising fees and rejecting qualified applicants, Whitman wants taxpayers to keep pouring money into scholarships to "crime school."

How might California downsize its prison system, save taxpayer dollars and protect public safety? Texas -- hardly a "soft-on-crime" state -- offers one model. In 2007, Texas lawmakers faced a choice: they could spend \$540 million to build new prisons that would cost another \$1.5 billion to operate or they could spend \$241 million to expand alternatives to prison such as residential drug and alcohol treatment centers, halfway houses and mental health facilities. They chose the latter.

So Meg Whitman, if you're reading this: As a Princeton alumna, I'm grateful that you've lavished so many millions on our alma mater. I hope the 19- and 20-year-olds lucky enough to live in Whitman College appreciate the generosity that funded their fancy digs. But as a resident of California, I'm appalled that you propose to use millions of taxpayer dollars to put 19- and 20-year-olds who are not so lucky in cages.

Think of the legacy you'd have as governor if, instead of expanding California's prison system, you expanded its network of addiction treatment programs, counseling providers, halfway houses and job training centers. Think what would happen if you shut down a few of California's "crime schools" and beefed up funding for K-12 schools.

As the 168,000 men and women living in them will tell you, we already have enough prisons.

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