

RESOLUTION COULD IMPACT OVERCROWDING IF FUNDED

By Shawn Ashley
Staff Writer

■(GIT) A concurrent resolution introduced Wednesday could help the Department of Corrections deal with its overcrowding problem — if it is ultimately funded.

Senate Concurrent Resolution 47, authored by Senator Gene Stipe, D-McAlester, and Representative Bill Smith, D-Ringling, directs the DOC to solicit competitive proposals from private prison contractors for the design, financing, siting, construction and operation of two 500-bed medium security prisons.

The facilities, DOC spokesman Jerry Massey, would be helpful in helping the department deal with its current overcrowding problem.

"By the end of fiscal year 1997," Massey said, "we are going to need to lease around 3,500 beds."

The question, however, is whether lawmakers would agree to provide the funding necessary to lease prison space.

"That's really the big issue," Massey said, "whether the legislature will give us the money to lease private prison bedspace."

Massey said proposals for the use of private prison space, such as Stipe and Smith's resolution, appear to be the best way for the corrections department to deal with its immediate growth.

"The advantage of private prisons and private construction is that they're not bound by the purchasing regulations we are," Massey explained. "That means they can build a facility more quickly."

Massey estimated that it would take the department from two to three years to construct a facility one 500-bed facility, while a private contractor could probably build the same facility in a year or less.

Some 13,160 inmates are currently housed in DOC facilities in Oklahoma, including 250 who are being held in the condemned east cellhouse at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester. That's 196 inmates above the crisis operation population limit and 2,527 above the State Board of Correction's legal population.

An additional 554 inmates are housed in private prisons in Texas. Approximately 340 inmates are backed up in county jails across the state, Massey said, waiting for bedspace to become available.

LAWMAKERS SAVE RELIGIOUS AMENDMENT FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS ACT

By Marta McCloskey
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Rep. Don Ross, D-Tulsa, put faith to the test when he successfully amended an amendment by Rep. Bill Graves, R-Oklahoma City. Ross had tried to table the passage of Graves's amendment to the Oklahoma Charter Schools Act. Ross claimed the amendment was discriminatory against other religions. The Graves amendment would allow charter schools the option to teach the Bible as a literary and history course. Ross's amended amendment passed with a narrow vote of 53 to 46.

Ross's amendment states that charter schools could opt to teach literature and history courses on all religions. Graves's had explained to Ross that his amendment teaches "what this country was founded on"... "the Bible." When Ross proposed his amendment to the amendment, Graves asked if it was a proposal to teach the "religion of Satanism." "I do not know what you are talking

(Continued)