



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

## State, Local Officials Slam Decision to Close Gowanda Correctional Facility

ROBERT G. ORTT December 22, 2020

| ISSUE: **CORRECTIONAL FACILITY CLOSURES**



GOWANDA – In the wake of yesterday’s announcement by the Cuomo administration that Gowanda Correctional Facility is one of three state prisons scheduled for imminent closure, a contingent of state legislators, including Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt, joined with local officials and union representatives to denounce the cost-cutting move. They noted that the decision will devastate employees and their families and undermine the community’s already vulnerable economy.

“Governor Cuomo’s announcement that the Gowanda Correctional Facility will close is not only untimely but demonstrates an ill-will toward hard-working Western New Yorkers. It is no secret that Gov. Cuomo and his allies in Albany have buckled under the pressures of pro-criminal special interest groups, but to make this announcement the week of Christmas is especially cruel,” said Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt.

“The closure of this correctional facility will devastate the local community, cost Western New York hundreds of jobs, and will force families to uproot and relocate during what is already a very challenging time. The brave men and women who show up every day to ensure the protection of New York’s residents deserve better than this,” said Senator Ortt.

“After months of putting their health and safety at risk to do their jobs in the midst of a pandemic, the hardworking men and women who staff Gowanda Correctional Facility have received their holiday ‘thanks’ from the state: notification that their place of employment is closing in a matter of weeks,” said Senator George Borrello, whose 57th Senate District encompasses the Cattaraugus County portion of the Village of Gowanda.

“What looks like a few lines on a budget spreadsheet to the Governor and DOCCS officials represent the economic anchor for these employees, their families and the entire Gowanda community,” the Senator added. “Decades of investment in the infrastructure, programming and personnel of the prison is being decimated in one stroke.”

Senator Patrick Gallivan, whose 59th Senate District includes the village’s Erie County portion, said: “The impact this decision will have on the dedicated men and women who work at the Gowanda facility and their families, especially at this difficult time for so many people, is concerning, as is the impact on the community. My office will work with DOCCS and the New York State Correctional Officers & Police Benevolent Association (NYSCOPBA), AFSCME, CSEA and PEF to ensure the best possible outcome for all those affected. I thank

all of the hardworking public servants at the Gowanda Correctional Facility for their professionalism under these very difficult circumstances."

The slated closure of Gowanda is one of three prisons targeted under the plan announced by the NYS Department of Correction and Community Supervision (DOCCS). The 2020-21 State Budget gave the Governor the authority to close an unspecified number of prisons with 90 days' notice. The other facility closures announced this week include the Watertown Correctional Facility and the Annex at Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora. Altogether, more than 1000 employees will be affected, including more than 600 at Gowanda.

"Once again, in a rush to check the 'done' box, best practices like transition planning and facility repurposing go out the window. It is a poor way of managing what is arguably one of the state's most critical operations and a terrible way to treat public servants who have devoted themselves to the important work and rehabilitation that takes place inside these walls," said Senator Borrello.

Assemblyman Joseph M. Giglio, who represents the 148th Assembly District and is the ranking minority member of the Assembly Committee on Corrections, underscored the fact that these closures will further undermine public safety in the state.

"This is the latest of the governor's attempts to systematically dismantle the corrections system in New York state, which he has done since day one. The employees who work in corrections will be in greater danger from assault as inmates are transferred within the system," said Assemblyman Giglio.

"The closure of these facilities further illustrates this administration's lack of concern for public safety and the protection of our citizens. In addition, this action shows complete disregard for the men and women who work at these facilities, as well as their families," he

added.

Gowanda Mayor David Smith indicated that while the state's offer to work with employee unions on arranging voluntary transfers to other facilities may work for some families, for others, it will be impossible.

"Most Gowanda Correctional employees have deep roots in this community. They have spouses with jobs, children in the local school district and extended family in the area. The notion that they can easily relocate in just a few weeks' time is simply insulting," said Mayor Smith.

"It is impossible to overstate how economically devastating this closure will be to our community. As the largest employer in the area, it drives most of our economy, either directly or indirectly. This rapid closure, without any plan in place to repurpose the facility and replace those jobs, is incredibly reckless," the Mayor added.

NYSCOPBA Western Region Vice President Mark DeBurgomaster emphasized the importance of the state pausing its closure plans until the epidemic of violence within the prison system is addressed.

"The job of a corrections officer has always been a difficult and dangerous one. However, in recent years, the violence inside our prisons has escalated to unprecedented levels. Additional closures will only exacerbate the situation by forcing the existing prison population into a decreasing number of facilities, further jeopardizing the safety of NYSCOPBA members and the inmate population," said DeBurgomaster. "Rather than help the state, such a situation will increase its challenges, and its costs, and make it even harder to recruit new corrections officers. This is a lose-lose proposition. Together with everyone here today, I urge the Governor and the Commissioner to revisit this decision."

###