Legislators visit Louisiana State Penitentiary, talk to interim warden

By JOHN SEMEFN
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A caravan of state legislators visited Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola Monday to talk to Interim Warden Larry Smith and get a firsthand look at problems that prompted a federal judge to declare a state of emergency at the maximum security prison.

“We’ve heard so much about what’s wrong up here, we’re trying to find out for ourselves,” Sen. B.B. “Sixty” Rayburn, D-Bogalusa, told Smith.

“We’re prepared to show you the entire prison farm if it takes from now until midnight,” Smith said to Rayburn.

The group included members of the Joint Legislative Committee on the Warden and Aspy, who is chairman of the committee.

The legislative tour included Angola’s vacant reception center, as well as empty and occupied cell blocks in the main prison building.

After the tour, Rayburn said he did not see any evidence of lax security or poor administration alleged in court reports from an ongoing federal investigation of the prison.

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“It looks to me like this institution was caught like many other institutions when the dollars were short,” he said.

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“I’ve talked to six or eight guards today from my home area and they said it had been running fine until the budget cuts,” he said.

Smith agreed that the empty beds at Angola were the result of budget cuts that went too deep into the operating expenses of the prison.

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now partially vacant at the prison.

But Smith said problems at Angola stem from a "combination of money as well as staff problems, morale, and trying to get people to and from work."

Other legislators on Monday's tour had mixed reactions to what they saw.

"I think it's ridiculous that all this is vacant," said Rep. Raymond Jetson, D-Baton Rouge, of the empty beds. "An important point is why isn't it utilized."

Rep. Carl Crane, R-Baton Rouge, said he was glad to be able to take a closer look at the prison in light of the recent controversy over security and administration.

"It gives us an idea of just what the situation is like at Angola," he said. "We're learning a lot, and I'm sure we'll learn more as we go along."

Rep. V.J. Bella, R-Berwick, said the tour was similar to visits he and other legislators made to Angola in the early 1970s. He agreed that prisons have not been given a high priority by the Legislature.

Before the tour, Rayburn took issue with a recent statement by U.S. Attorney Raymond Lamonica that former Angola Warden Ross Maggio's investigation at Angola had saved the state $700,000 by uncovering unused cell blocks.

Rayburn said he doesn't see the savings because it costs the state $28 a day to house each prisoner at Angola and that it pays $18.75 a day for the care of state inmates in parish jails.

Angola has been at the center of controversy since June, when U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola declared a state of emergency in the wake of rising inmate suicides, escapes and murders.

Polozola appointed Maggio as the court's prison expert and ordered an investigation of Angola's administrative and security operation that has been the subject of several hearings.

Maggio's investigation found 297 unused beds at Angola and Maggio has claimed that the prison can house even more inmates. He has also submitted a list of recommendations to state corrections officials concerning security and administration.

The problems at Angola have also prompted Gov. Buddy Roemer to reopen a Louisiana State Police investigation that ended in 1988. East/West Feliciana Parish District Attorney Hal Ware has opened a separate grand jury investigation into possible corruption at the prison.