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Prison-reform study will tread same old path while state prisons burn cash

Ohio's prison system is full to overflowing, costing almost \$2 billion a year and climbing -- money that isn't going to schools, hospitals, libraries, parks and highways.

Lawmakers have had multiple opportunities over the past year to pass an intelligent fix that would save money and ease the dangerous overcrowding of inmates. All parts of the plan already are used to a limited extent in Ohio's prisons or have been successful in other states.

Democratic Gov. Ted Strickland introduced the plan in his budget proposal in the spring. Republican Sen. Bill Seitz of Cincinnati thought its ideas were so important that he introduced them in stand-alone Senate Bill 22 in April.

But lawmakers, particularly the House leadership, have chosen to do nothing, claiming the problem needs more study.

So on Tuesday, state officials announced that the nonpartisan national Council of State Governments' Justice Center will research the problem of prison overcrowding and cost-containment and come back with recommendations this summer.

But the council already has looked into the very same problems in several states across the country, and Seitz's Senate Bill 22 essentially is a variation on the advice that the council has handed out elsewhere: Give incentives to prisoners to behave, including earlier release for completing prison programs. Bulk up community-based corrections, including drug and mental-health treatment, so nonviolent prisoners can be diverted. Find different ways to punish minor, technical parole violations.

States that have heeded the council's advice have benefited greatly.

Connecticut, for example, implemented some of the new approaches and, within three years, went from having the second-fastest-growing prison population in the U.S. to the state with the steepest decline. Texas was able to significantly slow its prison-population growth, thus averting hundreds of millions of dollars of spending in the coming years on the influx of inmates.

So why should the legislature reinvent the wheel? Senate Bill 22 is awaiting action. Every day that the state delays is money down the drain. If the legislature hasn't noticed, Ohio isn't exactly rolling in dough.