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Prison problems: Reduced recidivism would fight against rising costs

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Alaska is facing an incarceration crossroads.

The state has just finished a \$250 million prison outside Wasilla that is expected to cost \$50 million per year to operate.

But the prison population in Alaska is growing at 3 percent per year. If that trend continues, the state's jails will be at full capacity again by 2016.

The budget for the Department of Corrections has been growing at 5.5 percent per year in part because the number of people behind bars has climbed from 4,231 in 2005 to 4,961 in 2012.

The daily cost of keeping an inmate behind bars is now about \$135.

So we either need to start planning now for a new jail, make plans to continue to send prisoners Outside or look at real ways to reduce recidivism.

One of the most intriguing suggestions we've seen is to reclassify the offense of possession of small amounts of illegal drugs as misdemeanors instead of felonies.

There is room for debate as to the quantities of drugs that should lead to simple misdemeanor possession charges, but the legislative review now taking place is warranted.

Drug dealers should continue to face felony charges and law enforcement officers have testified that relaxing drug laws would endanger public safety.

On the other hand, advocates of reclassification say some people picked up for small amounts of drugs would be better candidates for rehabilitation if they are not charged with a felony. The advocates of reclassification say there ought to be a chance for changing behavior before someone is branded as a felon.

Protecting society and recognizing the need for rehabilitation are not necessarily conflicting goals, but they don't always work in unison.

Drug addiction is a serious problem in Alaska that is getting worse. There is no easy solution here.

We need to improve rehabilitation programs and protect public safety, while recognizing that if we don't do something about the growing rate of incarceration in Alaska, we need to get moving now to

build our next prison.