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Jack Ryan: Go for it

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On Wednesday outside the Golden Corral I signed a petition calling for the private prison to be put to Pike County voters in a referendum. Everybody ought to want the issue on a ballot, as an up-or-down vote is the best way to decide whether the county should proceed with the proposal.

Scott and Grace Johnson, two of the prison opponents organizing the petition, told me they already have more than the 1,500 required to force the vote. So it looks like there will be a referendum.

The Johnsons and I have traded e-mails about the prison proposal that have at times become testy. They seemed like nice people in person.

Unfortunately, after reading this I will probably receive some critical e-mails. I have decided to state clearly that Pike County ought to try and get the private prison.

Do I have reservations about it? Some. I've been over them in detail in past columns. But I can't shake the belief that the county would benefit from 300 jobs that offer medical benefits and a retirement plan.

If my math is right, the average salary would be \$19,000 or so, which is OK, not great. But there would be another \$4,000 in insurance benefits that would help a lot of people who go without medical care now because they can't afford it.

There are two things that have swayed me in favor of the prison.

One was a trip that staff writer Ernest Herndon and I took to Greenwood about a month ago. Corrections Corporation of America, which wants to build the prison here, operates one in Greenwood, a town about the size of McComb. We thought Greenwood was a much better comparison to Pike County than the CCA prison in Woodville.

Ernest and I went to Greenwood expecting people to gripe about the prison. We talked to about 20 people — elected officials, business people, the editor of the newspaper, the man on the street and a couple of guys who live about a mile away from the prison. None had any complaints. This acceptance of the prison shocked me, given what's going on here.

I am told by some members of my news staff that they've heard grumbles that Ernest's reporting was biased. Right, that's how he and I have earned our reputations over the years, by slanting the news. All I can say is, if you wish to believe that we built a fire by the Yazoo River and spent

the day eating sardines and making up quotes, you are entitled to your opinion. But it didn't happen. For starters, I do not eat sardines.

The second thing that moves me to become more vocal is the way prison critics acted at last week's public forum in Magnolia. I did not attend, but two people whose opinions I trust said that anyone who spoke in favor of the project had to put up with too many insults.

Sorry, but I have a problem with that, and I don't think shouting matches are the way to win an argument. It's certainly not going to convince me.

The prison opponents have some legitimate concerns: What if somebody escapes? What if CCA sends a bunch of convicted killers here? But harassing or heckling someone who disagrees is a lousy way to make your case. It sounds a lot like the politically correct atmosphere on college campuses, where the free exchange of ideas is celebrated until someone says something you don't like. Then it becomes muzzle the opponent.

I thought one comment at last week's meeting rang especially true. People were asking about the type of inmates that would be held, and someone noted that residents should be aware that killers, robbers, molesters and drug dealers already are held locally for long periods of time — in the Pike County jail.

As far as concerns about child molesters escaping from the private prison, trust me, they are already here. Check out each county's sex-offender registry at www.sor.mdps.state.ms.us. Or let me save you some time by reporting that 53 Pike County residents are on the list, along with 11 from Amite County and 16 from Walthall County.

Somebody asked last week if I thought the prison referendum would pass. My guess is that if it's on the ballot with the state and local primaries or the general election, it will pass because more voters will turn out. If it's by itself on a special voting day, it will fail because only those opposed will turn out.

There is a chance that the prison will wind up in Adams County, or maybe Walthall County, which recently joined the chase. If that happens, so be it, although I wonder what hostile questions will arise the next time the Pike County wants to develop its industrial park.

Prison opponents who are upset with this column can take heart in knowing that a far longer piece, by retired dentist Jimmy McDonald, who is against the proposal, will run on this page in a few days, probably Tuesday. There goes your biased editor again, giving space to those who disagree.

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