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Prison Proposals Worth Considering

CITIZENS are not so much worried about overcrowding of prisons as they are about the number of criminals loose on the streets.

Courts, corrections officials, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Pardon and Parole Board seem to think prisoners ought to be provided with comforts of home or be released. More concern is in evidence for lawbreakers than for crime victims.

Comments received from readers indicate that the public holds considerably different opinions about what ought to be done about crime and punishment.

"Why don't we make our penal system self-supporting by having road work and other public works performed by convicts housed in portable prisons?" asks Joe Baker, Oklahoma City preacher who formerly managed an Enid hospital. Baker suggests that working convicts be paid, with wages forwarded to their families to keep them off welfare rolls.

He has a good point, but in order to compel prisoners to work the pub-

lic must overrule objections of the ACLU and other "sob sister" organizations, federal judges and state politicians who may benefit from penal system patronage.

Over three years ago Dr. Jack Moore, retired Ada dentist living in Oklahoma City, launched a personal campaign to interest penal officials in less costly housing for prisoners.

Moore recalled how he and millions of other World War II military personnel had been housed in bare frame structures with minimal conveniences while defending our country. He argued, quite logically, that felons do not deserve any better.

He was unable to interest the governor, legislators, civic groups, state penal authorities or others in position to act to do anything. Instead, the Board of Corrections last winter recommended that Oklahoma build 23 to 33 new penal facilities in five years at a cost of around \$400 million.

Some legislators did discuss authorizing one — just one — dormito-

ry type prison at a cost of \$3 million, but it was just talk.

Many states utilize prison industries extensively. Texas operates nearly two dozen types to teach trades and crafts to prisoners and to help make the system more nearly self-supporting.

Prison work plans are used sparingly in Oklahoma. Labor organizations and some businessmen have objected that prison industries might be competitive to their interests. Previous use of road building gangs resulted in criticism because they sometimes strayed — accidentally, of course — to build roads on certain private lands.

Proposals like those of Mr. Baker and Dr. Moore may be too logical for politicians to assimilate. It might be too practical to use less costly prisons, to teach inmates to earn honest livelihoods, and encourage inmates to help support their own families.

However, our impression is that if the public could get officials to listen, some changes would be made in our penal system.