

Mayor Backs Plan to Close Rikers and Open Jails Elsewhere

By J. David Goodman

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Mayor Bill de Blasio vowed on Friday to close the troubled jail complex on Rikers Island, which has spawned federal investigations, brought waves of protests and became a byword for brutality, in a move he said was intended to end an era of mass incarceration in New York City.

The pledge to eventually close Rikers, a proposition once thought to be politically and practically unfeasible, came as an independent commission was about to release a 97-page report that recommended replacing the jails on Rikers with a system of smaller, borough-based jails, at a cost of \$10.6 billion.

“This is a very serious, sober, forever decision,” Mr. de Blasio said, standing in the marbled rotunda of City Hall beside the speaker of the City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, who has championed the closing of the complex while pushing the mayor to embrace the idea. “Once you’re off, you’re off,” he said of the island.

Mr. de Blasio said the jails could be closed in 10 years, providing the city could reduce the number of people who cycle through the city’s system to 5,000; low enough, that is, for every inmate to be taken off the 400-acre island and housed instead in jails elsewhere in the city.

He conceded that the process would be arduous and could take more than a decade if conditions in the court system did not improve, or if crime on the streets did not continue its decades-long downward trajectory.

Though Mr. de Blasio provided few specifics about his plan, its contours were expected to include some of the recommendations of the commission, led by Judge Jonathan Lippman and created by Ms. Mark-Viverito last year to study the issue.

“What we’re doing here is a whole philosophy shift,” Ms. Mark-Viverito said. “After decades of having a system that what it wants to do is strip away the dignity of individuals,” she said, “we’re trying to put some humanity back.”

Mr. de Blasio stopped short of endorsing the details of the commission’s report. He refused to say, for example, where any new facilities would be located, or to rule out building new jails on Rikers Island in the interim.

The report says the new jails “would vary in size, based on the expected population in each borough,” and would be built as close as possible to courthouses. There would be 5,500 beds across all five borough jails under the commission’s plan, with the largest one in Manhattan and the smallest on Staten Island.

Mr. de Blasio, at the news conference, denied knowledge of the recommendations of the commission, which was made up of criminal justice and prison reform advocates as well as real estate and business leaders.

According to two people with knowledge of the discussions, the mayor was briefed on the report during a Thursday evening meeting with Mr. Lippman, the former chief judge of the state’s highest court, and Ms. Mark-Viverito, and had balked at its specifics, most notably the suggestion that jails would be placed in each borough, a proposition that was “not politically viable” for the mayor, according to one of the people.

Mr. Lippman and Ms. Mark-Viverito were to discuss the commission report on Sunday at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Mr. Lippman did not attend Friday’s news conference.

Mr. de Blasio had said last year that closing the city’s complex on Rikers Island was a “noble idea,” but he refused to publicly back it because it could cost billions of dollars, take years, and would ignore more immediate needs on the island.

But the city's continued low crime numbers led him, more recently, to believe the jail complex could be closed.



The jail complex on Rikers Island in 2014. Richard Perry/The New York Times

The about-face by Mr. de Blasio, who is up for re-election this year, comes amid public pressure on the issue from Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and at a time when he has been hounded by prison reform advocates at events including town hall meetings around the city and a fund-raiser in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

“Clearly his team has been doing research because I heard a lot of things that mirrored the commission’s work,” said Glenn E. Martin, a commission member whose advocacy group, JustLeadershipUSA, has protested at Mr. de Blasio’s events. “Now, the work begins.”

Rory Lancman, a Queens councilman who has pressed the mayor to do more on criminal justice issues, said politics drove the timing, if not the substance, of the announcement. Mr. de Blasio did not want to wait for the release of Mr. Lippman’s report on Sunday, he said, which would have left him virtually alone among the city’s progressive Democrats in defending Rikers.

“He big-footed the Lippman announcement and got on board the train before he was about to be under it,” Mr. Lancman said.

Under supervision by a federal monitor, Mr. de Blasio has made reforms on Rikers Island, including more training for officers, new procedures on the use of force and a reduction in the use of solitary confinement.

But the idea of closing the aging jails on the island, to criminal justice reformers, accomplishes several goals at once.

It would allow for safer, more modern jails that could more easily provide services to inmates and offer better conditions for guards, they say. Putting them in each borough would reduce the travel time to court appearances, speeding up the process and saving the city money, and allow for easier visitation by family members of those in the jail system. And its closure would provide a firm break from the history of brutal violence on Rikers Island by inmates and, particularly, by correction officers that resulted in a 2015 federal court settlement.



The enhanced supervision housing unit at Rikers Island that Mayor Bill de Blasio toured in 2015. Richard Perry/The New York Times

But it was the commission that “created the leverage” to move the mayor to support Rikers Island’s eventual closure, said Herbert Sturz, a former deputy mayor for criminal justice during Koch administration, and one of the commission’s 27 members. “It’s good for the quality of justice in this city and beyond,” he added. “Rikers, after all these years, can change.”

The neighborhood politics of closing Rikers Island have been widely known since before Ms. Mark-Viverito laid out her dream of a city without the complex during her State of the City address last year. Siting of new jails would require support from local elected leaders and would be certain to face opposition. The mayor is already having to navigate similar issues as his administration embarks on a five-year plan to create 90 new homeless shelters around the city.

The city already has other jails besides Rikers Island: in Lower Manhattan and Downtown Brooklyn, as well as on a floating barge off the Bronx in the East River. Those facilities total only about 2,400 beds.

The report outlines a series of first steps, including holding fewer people on bail; expanding diversion programs for drug offenders and those with mental illness; and changing state law to treat some low-level offenses — like fare-beating, marijuana possession in public view, prostitution and possession of so-called gravity knives — as civil rather than criminal matters.

The commission also calls for reducing the uniformed staff at the Department of Correction by more than half, to 3,700 from about 10,000 now, resulting in about \$1.4 billion in annual savings, according to the report.

“Closing Rikers Island also provides a unique opportunity to redevelop the island,” the report observes, with the most promising future uses including an extension of La Guardia Airport to create a third runway, or a new hub of critical city infrastructure such as water and waste treatment centers, research facilities and a public greenway.

Despite the city's search for new places to build affordable housing, doing so on the island would not be feasible, the commission found.

The island will also likely need a new name, one that is not synonymous with violence and brutal jail conditions, the report observes, without offering any suggestions.

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