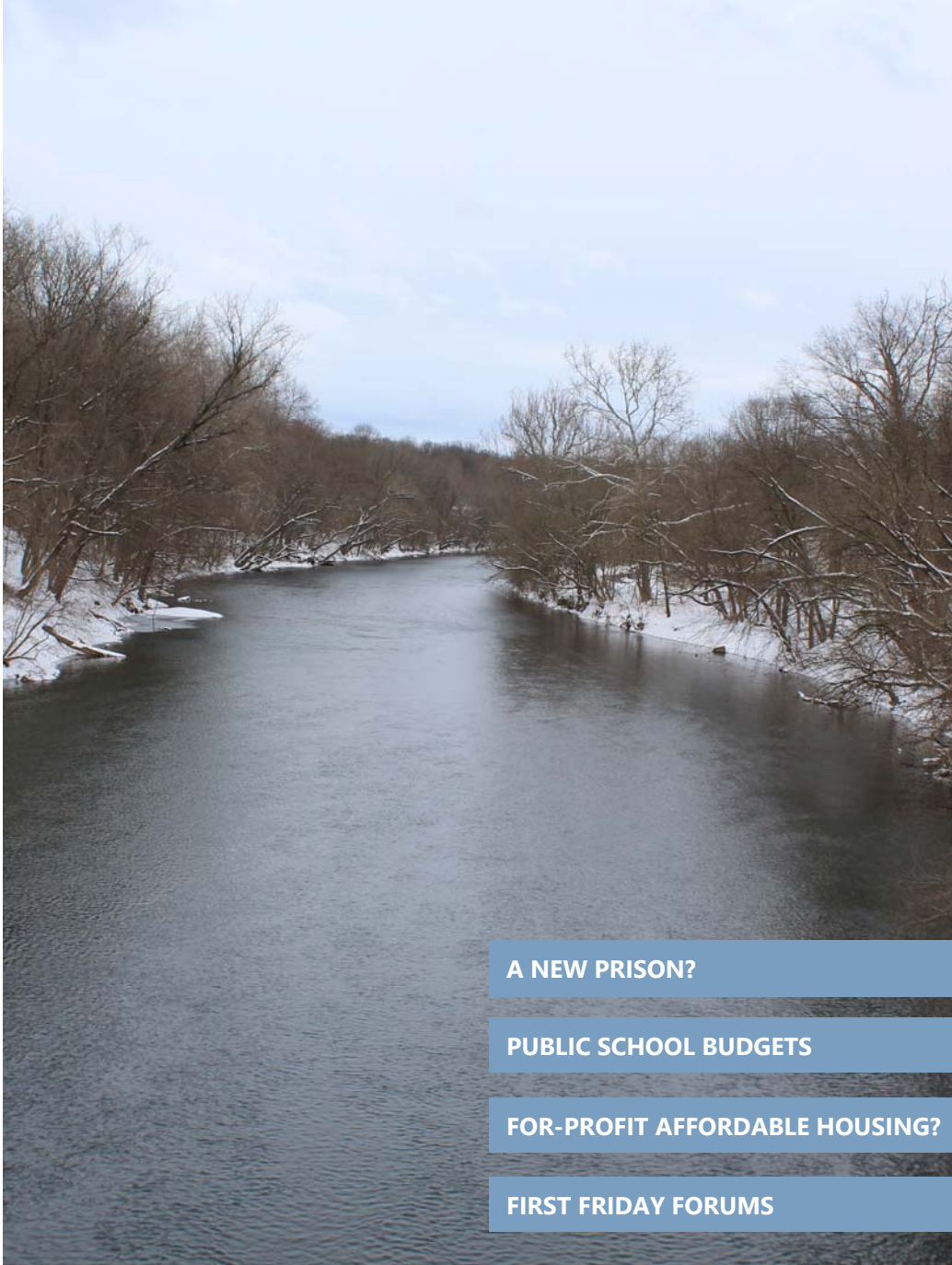


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Hourglass Quarterly



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A NEW PRISON?

Designing a Lancaster County Prison

The verdict is in: The Lancaster County Prison is on its last legs. Portions of the structure date back to 1851, with the most modern section built in the 1990s. The building is in poor condition and presents a myriad of challenges to the prison staff and inmates. Jean Bickmire, head of Have a Heart for Persons in the Criminal Justice System, said in a column in LNP, "Conditions are awful: excessive heat in the summer and extreme cold in the winter because of a heating, ventilation and air conditioning system that is inefficient and can't be rectified. Current staff members do the best they can, but they cannot control the rodents that come in after hard rains, or the water that leaks through the ceiling into the electrical fixtures. When outdated fixtures break, more expensive custom-made replacements must be ordered. Portions of the facility are closed because they cannot be used."

It seems as though the Lancaster County Prison Board, comprised of the Lancaster County Commissioners, agrees. "I think everyone agrees that a new prison will be needed in the near future" said Commissioner Parsons at the Hourglass January First Friday Forum. At the August 20, 2020 prison board meeting, Commissioner Leh-

man indicated that COVID-19 has further exposed the flaws of the jail and, "exacerbated the weakness of the facility and made it so much harder to manage a facility like this." All signs point to a new prison coming to Lancaster.



The building of a new prison is not insignificant and will have lasting impacts. Portions of the current prison have been with us for 170 years! When building a new prison, it is imperative that we design a prison that not only functions to house inmates in a safe and secure manner, the prison must facilitate the rehabilitation and reentry of prisoners back into society. In addition to the wonderful work undertaken by social service agencies and prison staff to prepare inmates for a return to civilian life, the building itself can play a crucial role in this rehabilitation process.

The most ubiquitous prison designs isolate prisoners from the outside world and from each other. This isolation, it turns out, works counter to reintroducing people back into society. Brutally functional designs and



the use of cold, hard materials both inflict psychological harm on inmates and staff, and symbolically shape and reflect the public perception of prisoners as cold, hardened criminals

So what might Lancaster County consider when designing a new prison? Prison design architects have many different ideas. Kenneth Ricci, designer of the award winning Union County Juvenile Detention Center in NJ says, "Environment cues behavior. You maximize safety by designing for good sight lines, reasonable decibel levels, and daylight and exterior views, especially of nature, which measurably reduces adrenaline levels." The facility he designed is a one-room-deep building with all spaces wrapped around a 1 acre glass walled courtyard. Other effective prison designs include acoustic engineering and secure glass as opposed to metal bars on windows and doors.



Union County Juvenile Detention Center.
Credit: JINGOLI

The Architectural Review publication highlighted the innovative work of Sweden. "In Sweden the emphasis is on evidence-based rehabilitation rather than on punitive incarceration. Intensive social work takes place in stylishly furnished prisons, which feature common areas and are frequently open to the outside world – the essential rationale being that hermetically sealing people off from society can only create unproductive sociopaths. The incarceration rate is relatively low, as is recidivism (40 per cent, around half the rate of the rest of Europe)."

While examples from other countries might not be a perfect fit for our criminal justice system, an examination of best practices used in prison design is well worth the investment. This is an opportunity for Lancaster County to yet again lead the state and the Country by example.

"Typology: Prison", By Tom Wilkinson. The Architectural Review, June 11, 2018.

"Architecture and Prison Reform", By Jerry Adler. Architectural Record, March 4, 2019.

