

Black Caucus backing prison at Fort Armistead

ANNAPOLIS — The Maryland Legislative Black Caucus is expected to lend its full support to a proposal to switch the site of an 890-bed medium-minimum security prison from the old Continental Can Co. factory to the Fort Armistead area, according to caucus sources.

The AFRO has learned that the caucus has decided to support the bill making the change although no official vote among the members had been taken.

Del. Arthur Murphy, chairman of the caucus, would not directly comment on the reports but did say "The caucus will take the position of supporting getting rid of Continental Can as a site for the prison.

"I see no reason why the caucus should not support (Acting Gov.) Lee's measure," he said. "We (the caucus) supported the East Baltimore legislators last year when they fought the bill to have the prison built on the Continental Can site in the first place.

"The bill to take the money for the prison site at Continental Can out of the budget failed, so we

have to see that this bill does not die, too."

The bill, which calls for an appropriation of \$26 million, was proposed by Blair Lee after community protest forced him to back off on the Continental Can proposal. The acting governor then decided on Fort Armistead referring to the site as a "more secluded" area.

It would also require the state to obtain title for the Fort Armistead property by Feb. 15, 1979, or the prison construction will begin at the Continental Can site approved by last year's general assembly.

Debate on the proposal began at the Monday night session. Details were unavailable at presstime.

The Fort Armistead proposal was passed by the House Appropriations Committee last Thursday.

Robert Jacques, D-Montgomery, said "The long and short of it is that if we don't approve the Fort Armistead site we will not get a prison built at all."

Del. Paul Weissengoff, D-Baltimore, had recommended a third site in the downtown area telling the committee the

Fort Armistead prison would require construction delays up to six years past this summer and cost overruns of \$10 million above the \$21.5 million price tag for Continental Can.

Lee aides testified delays would be about four months and the extra cost would be \$4 million.

Weissengoff said, "The problems with getting the federal deed lifted to build the prison are almost insurmountable. In addition, the site has silty ground and will require cost overruns."

Jacques told Weissengoff that his recommendation for the downtown prison site would not be agreeable to state prison officials but Weissengoff assured him it was.

Weissengoff had recommended a 200-bed prison with the possibility of additional construction of another 200-bed facility. The recommendation was later rejected by Lee.

"Your choice is a 400-bed facility immediately or an 890-bed prison as much as six years from now," Weissengoff said.