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In a year in which a lot has gone right for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger -- a revving economy, an on-time budget, a deal with lawmakers on a long-term plan to build roads, schools and levees -- the mess that is California's prison system is a stain on the governor's re-election resume.

But even as Schwarzenegger admitted this week that his corrections department is "falling apart in front of our very eyes," it's uncertain whether dangerously jam-packed lockups and the state's woeful record of rehabilitating criminals will hurt his bid to keep his job for an additional four years.

State Treasurer and Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Phil Angelides, who has been virtually silent on criminal justice issues, has not highlighted the prison crisis in his campaign. And this week, Schwarzenegger sought to neutralize his prison problem by blending corrections issues with public safety issues, holding campaign events with law enforcement officials singing his praises for moves like helping to defeat efforts to reform the "three strikes" sentencing law and supporting an upcoming ballot initiative that would crack down on sex offenders.

There is plenty to poke at Schwarzenegger on prison policy.

The state's corrections budget has soared by more than 65 percent during his tenure. A federal judge took over medical care within the prison system, and courts are closely monitoring everything from internal affairs investigations to parole policies. Two Schwarzenegger appointees charged with heading the department quit within six weeks of each other. California inmates get out of prison and commit new crimes at twice the rate of the national average.

"It was hard to imagine the state's prisons getting worse than when Schwarzenegger took office, but they have," noted Dan MacAllair, executive director of the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice in San Francisco.

But Angelides hasn't mounted much of an attack.

When Schwarzenegger announced Monday that he would convene a special legislative session to consider building more prisons and shifting thousands of inmates out of institutions and into community facilities, Angelides was quick to blast the governor for the presiding "over a meltdown of a prison system that is a threat to public safety."

But he had few specifics about what he would do differently, suggesting only that he would audit the corrections department if elected and make changes after that. A spokesman later said Angelides would consider boosting mental health care for inmates who needed it and steering the state toward smaller prisons, but he offered few details about the ideas.

Angelides also has mentioned one other solution: hiring more prison guards. The corrections system does face a severe shortage of employees, but the comment by Angelides may have been more about wooing the union, which has yet to endorse a gubernatorial candidate.

The politics of crime and punishment in California may be stifling Angelides' response.

Crime has taken a backseat to other political issues, ranging from the environment to taxes, and packed prisons simply aren't a big worry for voters, noted Ray McNally, a veteran political consultant who works closely with the union, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association.

"If the public had their way, we'd be stacking inmates in cells like cordwood," he said.

For politicians seeking statewide office, crime can be a tricky issue.

Intertwined with the special legislative session Schwarzenegger has called in part to try to pass legislation aimed at building more prisons, Democrats say they want to talk about other ways to address overcrowding. Legislation by state Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, for example, suggests releasing some geriatric prisoners and reducing parole terms for low-risk parolees as options for cutting the prison population. The bill has already passed out of the Senate and one Assembly committee.

"I'm more interested in looking at alternative remedies than just building more prisons,"

said state Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland.

Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, chairman of the Assembly's Public Safety Committee, said he hopes to hold hearings during the special session to explore problems with sentencing laws in California that have reduced emphasis on rehabilitation in the prison system.

Some political experts, however, suggest there is danger in an election-year push for big change in criminal justice policy.

"Sentencing reform sounds great if you're in an Assembly district in Los Angeles or San Francisco, but it's not exactly a winning issue most anywhere else," noted Dan Schnur, a political strategist who worked in former Gov. Pete Wilson's administration.

Angelides could potentially face a complicated balancing act this summer as his liberal base argues for changes that Schwarzenegger could use to accuse Democrats of being soft on crime, Schnur said.

In fact, despite his failures on prison issues, Schwarzenegger clearly believes he has the upper hand when it comes to using the crime issue.

The governor attended a news conference Thursday in San Diego to tout "Jessica's Law," a November ballot initiative that would toughen penalties for sex crimes against children, prohibit most sex offenders from living near schools and parks, and require many sex offenders to wear Global Positioning System ankle bracelets for the rest of their lives.

Democratic legislators have proposed two alternative bills this year to Jessica's Law, arguing that the residency requirements have backfired in other states and will not deter crime and that new technology should be used on parolees who have a high risk of reoffending, which would be more cost effective.

Angelides, however, has not taken a position on the initiative, prompting the governor's campaign to continually send him letters asking him to join the governor on the campaign and making sure reporters are aware of Angelides' indecision.

Angelides also may be walking a tightrope on corrections policy as he courts the prison guards union.

A scathing report released last week by a special master working for U.S. District Judge Thelton Henderson accused Schwarzenegger of abandoning prison reforms and allowing the union too much clout on policy decisions. The report drew comparisons between Schwarzenegger and former Democratic Gov. Gray Davis, who was weakened politically

by the perception that he allowed the union to control the corrections department in exchange for campaign contributions.

But Angelides has barely mentioned the report -- which was roundly criticized by the union. Highlighting it would surely upset the union, which has about \$10 million to spend this fall and has mastered the art of effective advertising campaigns against a candidate.

That's something that could benefit Angelides in a difficult battle to unseat Schwarzenegger.

Union President Mike Jimenez said this week that the union planned to interview both Schwarzenegger and Angelides in August and make a decision after that.

Despite waging war against Schwarzenegger on several prison issues during the past two years and playing a role in labor's effort last year to defeat the governor's special election agenda, Jimenez said the union would approach the endorsement process with an open mind.

"It would be unwise of us to prematurely eliminate any candidate," he said.

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