

# Resolutions on Medicaid expansion, prison relocation are weeks, maybe months away

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SALT LAKE CITY — By the end of the week, two of the biggest issues facing the state were supposed to be resolved. But state leaders are going to miss their self-imposed deadlines by weeks if not months.

A new plan for using the hundreds of millions of dollars available to the state for Medicaid expansion under President Barack Obama's signature health care law was due Friday, according to the schedule set earlier this year by Gov. Gary Herbert.

And a recommendation on a new place for the Utah State Prison in Draper from the Legislature's Prison Relocation Commission was set to be made by Saturday, according to a law passed last session.

It's been clear for some time, though, that both deadlines would come and go without the work being completed, making it increasingly unlikely lawmakers will be able to act on either issue in a special session until October at the earliest.

The governor's so-called "Gang of Six" that's been meeting privately to come up with a solution to last session's standoff over Medicaid expansion announced on July 17 that a "[conceptual framework](#)" had been reached.

Just when that will be fleshed out into a proposal ready to be made public remains to be seen. [Herbert said Monday](#) he's optimistic there will be a plan in place to share with lawmakers in three or four weeks.

The prison commission, under increasing pressure to consider rebuilding on the Draper site, had decided in mid-July it could take until Oct. 1 to review studies of the four sites identified for the 4,000-bed facility.

While there's plenty of interest in seeing how both issues are resolved, University of [Utah political](#) science professor Matthew Burbank said the public has a very different perception of the deadlines.

For many Utahns, especially those earning below poverty wages in the so-called coverage gap who have been waiting for health care, a decision on Medicaid expansion can't come fast enough.

The GOP-dominated Legislature, however, has been reluctant to sign on to a federal government program that's part of the law known as Obamacare, Burbank said, because that's "not very politically palatable."

When it comes to the \$550 million prison project, though, the push to find a new site has come from those who want to free up the nearly 700 acres along Utah's high-tech "Silicon Slopes" corridor for development.

There is significant political and community opposition near all of the sites being considered: in Salt Lake City, west of Salt Lake City International Airport; in Eagle Mountain and Fairfield in Utah County; and in Grantsville in Tooele County.

"The comparison is kind of interesting because one seems to be dragging on because of politics, and the other is moving at the speed of light because of politics," Burbank said.

With Medicaid expansion, "it turns out, as we've seen in [Utah politics](#), that's a much more complex question," he said, while the thought that a new site could be chosen for the prison in a timely manner "was much more wishful thinking."

Unlike the prison move, however, the lack of action on Medicaid expansion carries life or death consequences.

"That's about as serious a point about policy that you can make, that people are dying because you're not making a decision," Burbank said. "No legislator wants to be in that position."

Senate President Wayne Niederhauser, R-Sandy, said he still hopes to see both Medicaid expansion and prison relocation settled before the 2016 Legislature begins in late January.

But he acknowledged that may not happen