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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** We're rolling. All right, so I guess let's start with you. You knew there was an investigation, and you did. You knew there were parallel investigations. There's internal. Governor rivers made reference to a federal investigation. So how many different. How long is it since October. Since the first death that they were talking about. This has been going on or how long is it's kind of brewing.

[00:00:23] **Speaker 2** It's been brewing for a while and October might be right. I didn't know there was an internal investigation. I knew the FBI and the feds got called in for one. And I knew the Dodge County Sheriff's Department was doing one, too. I guess in my head, I thought the FBI and the Dodge County were kind of one in the same in working together. And that may not have actually been the case, but I didn't know there were investigations going on to the different deaths that were happening at White Pine Correctional and going back to March of 2020. What would have been what, two years at now a fourth. So March of 2023, when they hit the interstate wasn't really, really a lock on the the modified movement. I knew since then there's been a lot of media coverage and issues that have been happening there. So I wasn't surprised that there were investigations going on. One weird thing about when you're the mayor of upon when they put in the modified movement or lockdown stuff last year, spring, people started calling me and sending me mail and emails from all over the state in the country who have loved ones in the prison. They didn't like some of the stuff being done, and they thought there was more that I could do. But as the mayor of the city, I don't run the prison in any way, I just work. They have a really good working relationship with the prison staff because it's a very unique thing. If you drive around the state of Wisconsin, most of your prisons are out in the country somewhere. But the city of open has three prisons and and they're in our city limits. And it's it's a unique thing to happen. It's something we're used to. Our police departments used to and our fire department is used to, but it's just something that we do deal with and we work with and we think nothing of it. But they're here and we just try to have a really good working relationship.

[00:01:53] **Speaker 1** So when you look at what the press conference brought with these charges, what was your reaction to charging that many people with for these incidents?

[00:02:02] **Speaker 2** I was surprised at that. I think. I'm not saying the sheriff did anything right or I'm not going there, but I think most of the people who work at the prison are almost all of them. Or all of them. They're going to work. They have a tough job. Correctional officers. And as the mayor of Upon, I've been trying to raise a stink on their behalf for a few years now, and I hope that I played a small role in helping Representative Schrier push through the pay raise they got. It's a thankless job. People see correctional officers like you. You run them in the local QuikTrip. They've got their blue shirt on and all that. Then they go to work. But unlike a police officer, you don't see them out working because they're on the other side of the wall, and they do a thankless job, and it's a hard job. And I've toured with Pond Correctional Institution, and there's some really bad people in there, and they will insult you. They will swear you, they will throw things at you. And there's only so much correctional officers can do. It's a high stress job. It can be a thankless job. It can be a miserable job. But at the same time, it can be a great career. But I don't think they ever got enough respect. And it's a hard job to do. And so I was sad to see so many people get, wrapped up in it. And on a personal note, I did not know the warden until I became the mayor. But I'm in my third year. The mayor in my relationship with Randy. Hap was phenomenal. He gave me and my staffer, last year a tour of the prison and his love for Pine Correctional. The history of it, what it means to the city. He knew everyone who worked there by their first name. Most of the inmates he knew, and they knew who he was. There were times where the tour stopped, and we'd have, like, a group of people. It was almost like a town hall. And he'd answer questions and try to make life better for the prisoners that were in there. And just the way we would work together on city issues, dealing with corrections, I, I was really sad to see his name get wrapped up in it, because I think Randy put in 40 years for corrections. I think he loved what he did. I think he loved the Pine Correctional. He could have retired a while ago, and he stayed around because I think he truly wanted to fix the problem over there. And so when I was called, by the sheriff and given a heads up what was coming, I hung up the phone and then walked down my hallway and literally went and threw up. I was really sad to see that because I do believe Randy's a good guy whose intentions were good, and he tried really, really hard. And I wonder why it stops with him. Like, I get state statute puts the warden in charge of everyone there, so I see where that's coming from. But at the same time, they're boxed in by the policies from up above. And I, I mean, the last few governors, I don't think have done much for corrections. You can go back. Scott Walker never came to open and never visited a prison. Tony Evers has done that. But I don't think he's taken the bull by the horns and fixed any of these problems. I think you go back to the Tommy Thompson era and Scott McCallum. Those were the last governors who cared about corrections and really fought for him when Tommy Thompson was the governor, and our corrections was the envy of the country. And like we would send people from our prisons to train around the country how to run a prison. And correctional officers respected him and morale was high and these things didn't happen. I'm not Tony Evers, and I'm not here to give him advice. But if I was in his shoes, I'd call Tommy Thompson and see if he'd be willing to be the corrections secretary for a year and fix this, because I know the correctional officers respect the heck out of him.

[00:05:27] **Speaker 1** But a lot's changed since Tommy Thompson. Zero funding for the prisons and also acting and taking away the unions for prison workers. It's changed the climate inside those facilities dramatically. Can you remove the is there a line coming from the state's underinvestment in the prison system, the lack of rights for prison guards in terms of their union rights, and then draw that to the what we see here in terms of short staffing, modified movement issues, low morale, all the problems that lead to these kind of incidents.

[00:06:03] **Speaker 2** Definitely. And there's two sides to that too. I've always been on the Republican side of things, and when act ten happened, I. I supported it, and it did a lot to give local city governments, like me, school boards, more control over their local stuff. And that's good. It's save taxpayers a lot of money. I understand why they went and corrections too. They needed to kick in on the pension benefits and the health insurance because of the cost. We were running the state budget deficit. Hindsight's 2020, but at the time I did say, I wish that they could have found a way to let correctional officers still unionize for safety and security reasons. There are a number one concern is their safety and getting home safe. And then the politics of it, like, correctional officers, they were they were supporters of Republicans in the Thompson era. They, they they fell away from that. I think Republican elected officials didn't care enough because they weren't voting for them. And the Democrat Party is more soft on crime for a lack of a better way of putting it. And I think there was no one looking out for them. And that went on for 14 years. And it led to the, their pay wasn't very good for what they were doing. The benefits weren't as attractive as they were. Morale in town and in corrections. It used to be it was a generational job. My dad worked there, I worked there, then their kid would work there. What happened after 2010 is people like, don't come work here, just don't do it. And that got out into the community and people stopped doing it and that wasn't a good thing. The very sad thing too, about this is after these new pay raises that came through in the last state budget, you can see in the Corrections Academy classes, the numbers are up. People are coming to work for corrections again. They're getting there. I would say within two years the vacancy rates going to get down to where it's manageable, and the prison can go back to the way it used to be. And then this hits the news. And I can see why this would deter people from wanting to work in corrections, because a lot of these are just people going to do their job. And I think they got swept up in something bigger than them. And I and I, I don't know, Secretary Carr and I've never met the governor, but I do hope that they at least take some of the responsibility and, and do something to fix this.

[00:08:09] **Speaker 1** When you have you read the criminal complaint?

[00:08:12] **Speaker 2** Yeah, most of it. Okay. I got it yesterday.

[00:08:14] **Speaker 1** Yeah. So when you read through some of the individual charges, a lot of them, especially for the most recent death, the starvation exposure, death. A lot of those are for negligence in terms of checking on inmates, falsifying records of whether they made their rounds in there. All of them are saying, well, I was doing a different job at the same time, you know, almost being coerced into covering up that they weren't doing these things. And it makes you seem like if someone else had had that shift, they would have been doing the same sign off on. They made the rounds and doing another job at the same time. It just happened to be them that was on the shift where someone died.

[00:08:49] **Speaker 2** Well, one of the persons that was charged, their shift was ending. I think it was one of the nurses that the sheriff referenced, and they didn't follow up on it because their shift was ending, but they'd been there for 16 hours or just tired. I worked at a local car dealership in town, and we sold a vehicle to a correctional officer who crashed his car because he fell asleep. He just worked three doubles in a row. You can't run a prison at 48% vacancy rate. But my thing is, the mayor of a pod is the prison. Isn't it a 40 or 52% vacancy rate? Because there's nothing wrong with the prison. It needs some modifications, don't get me wrong. But they needed to take better care of the people who were working there. And the pain. The benefits are the way you do that. And you can see that coming back. One of the things that really frustrates me in my role is there's two prisons that they're always talking about closing. It's green Bay and open wheel ponds, the oldest prison in the state, and green Bay is the second oldest. This fun fact mill Pond prisoners built the green Bay prison, but green Bay wants to close the prison up there for their own reasons. It's prime real estate. It's on the Fox River. It's near an interstate. It's great economic development. Land like you could do condos, malls, whatever. It's a ton of taxpayers. So they're looking at. I wish they would just be honest about it. Instead of running out on TV and saying it's a powder keg ready to blow. Well, every prison is instead of saying that trying to scare people, just being honest, we want the prison land because it's prime real estate for economic development. So then close green Bay will Pond's a different story. Our prisons on Madison Street. And we'll it's right in the middle of our city. The city goes around it. The daycare my kids went to is in the backyard. The library's across the street. We're used to it. It's part of our history. And it's not a threat to the community. It's been here forever. We don't want our prison to close. It can change or be something different. I'll grant you all of that. And the building needs some work. But Will. Pine Correctional is a lot of our history that's been here for 173 years. I have the license plate up there. Did you know the license plate on your car is manual on? And the metal stamping division? Every license plate in the state of Wisconsin is made in a. And so they meet those WCA 170 plates in honor of their anniversary a few years ago. It's a history that this community takes pride in. And we know people who work there and we care about them. But an interesting thing about Wilpon most of our churches have an outreach to the prison. We pray for the people who live in there in church every weekend. Most people drive by our city. They like the prisons in Wilpon. But to those of us who live here, the prisons in our community and these people are part of our community, we see the inmates mowing the lawn. We can see them on municipal projects, painting buildings. We're not afraid of them like it's a part of who we are. It's unique and special to Mill Pond, and I'm just getting sick and tired of being lumped in with green Bay because their priorities are different than ours. We like our prison and we're not afraid of it.

[00:11:31] **Speaker 1** So we've already seen the political game start. That was immediate governor issuing press releases. Republicans on joint finance releasing press releases. What is the danger in terms of turning this into a Partizan game, in terms of actually trying to resolve or solve or prevent these kind of things from happening?

[00:11:52] **Speaker 2** I would say there's two dangers. One, nothing gets fixed because they blame each other, and there's plenty of blame to go around. And two well, Park Correctional gets close because it says quick easy way to say I did something. And then that would hurt our community because the problem isn't the building. The problem is it was understaffed. And there's policies from up above that need to be fixed. There's a lot of blame to go around, and I think there's a lot of blame to go back a good 15 years. But in Will pine, we care about the prison and we care about the people who live there and the people who work there. And one of the things I want people to know is like, that's a hard job. I have several friends who do it and it, it, it wears on them. And I know people who aren't in. Well, I know the warden. I, I think I've met some of the people who were charged because they looked familiar and not sure if I know them, know them, but some of the other people mentioned in the criminal. I know who they are. These are people who they're good, decent people with families. And if they don't want to hurt anyone, anyone, prisoner or anyone, they're just. The prison was understaffed. They're under a lot of pressure. And, they just they go to work. And how do you get people to go to a job like that when you could end up in legal trouble, when you're just trying to put in your time and do what's right? And correctional officers don't get enough credit for being part of law enforcement. You know, Republicans like to talk about being tough on crime, and you see them throwing money at cops and everything, which is fine. My brother is a police chief. And if you ask him, I'm all for law enforcement. But correctional officers, like I said before, they do it on the other side of the wall, they're not seen. But they keep us safe by keeping the bad guys in there. And that's important too. And and inmates, obviously, we gotta treat them humanely and give them care. But let's not fool ourselves. A lot of these people are really awful. When I toured the prison, I went through that SEG unit and like, one guy has oven mitts taped to his hands because he would pull the skin off of himself. They are these are challenging jobs. A lot of these people have mental health issues, and maybe they shouldn't be in a prison. They should be somewhere else, but they can't be out on the street. And these correctional staff, they come in every day. It's a high stress job. They see the worst of the worst. They strip search people. People will throw their poop at you like it's not a great job. You get swore at a lot. And it just it wears them down, and I just I just don't think they get enough credit or respect for the line of work they do. And if I can do anything out of this story, it's just a point out how hard working correctional officers are.

[00:14:21] **Speaker 1** So what would what should be the solution? What should the state if if the state was functional in terms of the Capitol, what should they be trying to focus on?

[00:14:32] **Speaker 2** My solution would be everyone up in green Bay wants to sell their prison because they want the land. So sell it. Take whatever money you get for it. Start by putting that money to retrofitting the pond, and then maybe building another maximum security somewhere if you need to. But I don't see any reason to close both of them. The reality is, is building one massive new prison is super expensive, and it still doesn't house as many people as Will Pond and Green Bay once you can get. If they close green Bay, you get the money you retrofit. Will pond make it as good as you can? Some of the staff in green Bay could come into a pond. Then you don't have the staffing shortage, and then they can go back to the way it used to be, where it is a safe place for both the people who work there and the people who live there. And that's where I would start. And then we'll see how many numbers you have. And if you have to build another prison somewhere, I don't know. But like, corrections has been a mess for a while. They had the problem up at Lincoln Hills, and now you have the problem in the pond. And a lot of it just goes to the staffing issue.

[00:15:32] **Speaker 1** How much of it is simply prisoners don't vote. They're not a constituency.

[00:15:37] **Speaker 2** They're up with their families are. And we do hear from them. The other thing is, too, there's a lot of people who don't care. They're like, well, they're prisoners. They did something really wrong. Why are they in there? I don't say that. I think you need to treat them humanely, but I do get where people are coming from on that. But I just think a lot of it is there. You go to the other side of the prison wall and they're out of sight, out of mind, and it's forgotten. And unless something like this happens, people don't realize what's going on. One of the things that I hope happens is the shot from Sheriff Dale Schmidt's press conference. I think people are like, whoa, that's terrible. And I hope over the next couple of weeks people look at how hard it is to work it to, and I hope the truth of that comes out. I'm not obviously, I like the sheriff a lot. He's a friend of mine, and I know this was hard for him. But I also hope people also start to learn and understand how hard it is to be a correctional officer. And I know the sheriff does know that, but, it's a very tough job. And like I said before, I really hope people they don't just crap on correctional officers. They understand this is a tough job and there's not. Not an easy solution. And so I was kind of disappointed. Yesterday I saw press releases from the right criticizing the governor. The governor wanted to talk about fake electors. And I'm like, really? We've got this. This is a real problem. And corrections is the number one, I think, budget item. And it's like, can't we just sit down and like fix this has I mean, I'm just the mayor, but I think I've got a few solutions if they want to lessen.

[00:17:06] **Speaker 1** The charging the warden's. If you don't charge him, the question is going to be why you're not going up all the way up the chain. Like otherwise. And I think a lieutenant is the highest charged ranking officer. He's charged in both cases because he oversees that psych unit. So you charge the warden. But then there's a question of the warden in his interview in the criminal complaint clearly states like I would love to give more training. I would love to have more time to do hands on. I have to send out an email and let them know that these are the policies on when to turn on and off water. So is it. It sends a message to charge. But is that actually legally where the charge should be going?

[00:17:47] **Speaker 2** In my opinion, no. A but I'm biased in the fact that I have a really good relationship with the warden, and I consider him a friend. Like the sheriff said by state statute, I guess that the buck stops with him. But, I didn't. He could have retired years ago. I do think warden and Randy have stayed around to try to fix a prison that needed help, and he did the best he could. Maybe he wasn't the right guy to me. We just had a good working relationship, and he could have been gone a long time ago and not going through this. So I really feel for him and what he's going through. The water thing is interesting too, because as I've told you in the past, we have great water and will upon the person doesn't get the water, they're too cheap. So they have their own little, and like there's pieces of rust floating in the water. So we want to talk about bad water at the prison. Well, they could have hooked up to a pine utilities five minutes ago. That's how easy it is. But the state's too cheap to pay for city water, so maybe they should look at themselves before they blame the warden for the water.

[00:18:48] **Speaker 1** And. Would any other warden have made a difference?

[00:18:52] **Speaker 2** No, because we as a city had asked the state to just take our water and they kept saying no. When they were started building their water treatment plant for the three prisons in town, the wardens didn't even know that it was all of them. They didn't know it was being built. The communication at the state to the prisons sucked, let alone to the state, to the city. They never even came to the city for a permit to build it. They just did. Where the state can do whatever we want, and they're probably right. What are they? I need their shared revenue, so I can't complain, but I just. To me, that just shows you how they treated it. They didn't care. They didn't care how crappy the water is. It's cheaper. Well, Pond's got the best water in the state. It wouldn't have cost them that much money. They're building a multi-million dollar water plant now. Why? You know what they should have built on their lot is an apartment complex for new correctional officers who need an apartment to live, who can't afford one on a starting salary. They could have lived there, worked it. Will pond gotten some money in the bank and bought a house. One of the reasons there's a staffing shortage is there's nowhere to live. Does the state build housing? No. They build the water plant they don't need to build. That was a dumb idea.

[00:19:55] **Speaker 1** Where you got lots of farm fields around here once.

[00:19:58] **Speaker 2** Well, we do, but, I just don't know. I just that that ticks me off, too. You can buy some of these things to me by living here. It's just common sense and, like it ticks me off that they keep tying us to green Bay because we're two different things. It takes me, after telling the water plant when I could just buy a pond water, and they should have built an apartment building for people who start out as correctional officers who don't own a house yet. What a cool job benefit that is. Yeah, and we need, though.

[00:20:24] **Speaker 1** Really old fashioned worker housing that. Yeah, that goes back a century or more. It does. It was standard.

[00:20:30] **Speaker 2** And I just I don't know I just think they missed the boat on that. And then the politicians all just blame each other and there's plenty of that to go around. Like I was always disappointed that Scott Walker never came here and never visited a prison. His corrections is such a big part of what the state does. Tony Evers has come here. I gave him that. But he never tells us when he's coming either. And, he doesn't talk to us, but the wardens always did, so I just feel like this community likes the prisons being here. The prisons and the management of the prisons work really well with the community. And it's Madison that's got everything messed up. Like one of the other things that I always say that I'll never go anywhere. But I do believe this. So the state of Wisconsin pays way too much rent for the old American Family Insurance Building, where the Doc is headquartered in Madison. The state owns all this land around the pond, so why not build that? A dock headquarters across the street from the prison farm on highway 49? And they can actually be in a city with prisons and maybe see a real correctional officer and a real prisoner.

[00:21:30] **Speaker 1** So they didn't buy the building.

[00:21:31] **Speaker 2** They may have by now. I thought that was one of those Jim Doyle lease deals that was controversial.

[00:21:36] **Speaker 1** It could have been.

[00:21:36] **Speaker 2** But you'd have to look into that. And I'm not bringing that up to throw Doyle in. I'm just saying, why is it in Madison? There's no prisons in Madison. So why don't you come to a town of actual prisons in, in, like, we can show you around and tell you how it is.

[00:21:48] **Speaker 1** That the officials that have to.

[00:21:49] **Speaker 2** Drive up here, that's why they don't move.

[00:21:50] **Speaker 1** It.

[00:21:53] **Speaker 2** All right. And I know you're recording all this, so, like, I know what I'm saying. No, I know you don't. I don't have to be.

[00:21:57] **Speaker 1** You know, I've been in that building. Anything else you want to add along these lines?

[00:22:04] **Speaker 2** No, I don't think so. I just would wrap up with, like, it's the oldest prison in the state. It means a lot to our community because of the history of it, because we all know people who work there. And like I said before, people drive by Will pine, and I see the prisons there. But to us, the prisons here, it's part of our community. And we we care for the people who live there. All the churches in town have outreach. The different ministers go there different days of the week. We don't look down our noses at the prisoners because they're in prison. Although some of them made terrible mistakes. We do hope that they get their lives fixed and can can do better. One of the problems are that correctional officers at Will pine do have is and I don't know the percentage, but I would guess half of them are maybe never getting out because you get a life sentence. And then what do you have to lose? I met one of those guys when I toured it, and he was in the metal stamping division making license plates, and he been there 30 some years, and this is like his fifth warden or something. And it was kind of funny when I met him. He's a nice guy. Obviously he did something pretty terrible to be there that long, but, it was lunch time, and he. He liked making the license plates because it got him out of his cell, gave him something to do, and gave him a purpose in life. And so I thought that was kind of neat to meet him. But he's obviously one of those who was there for a long time and wants to make life as good as it can be. A lot of them just don't care. And one of the things that was going on is when they started the lockdown and this did work. The lockdown started because the newer inmates were causing the trouble. A lot of the older guys are like, knock it off so we can go back to getting out and having more visitors and stuff and like they were policing themselves and I, I thought the warden had a pretty good handle on it. Things were getting better from the reports I would get, so I was a little shocked on Monday when the sheriff called and I don't know where it's going to go, but I do wish the warden well because at least my working relationship with him was phenomenal and I was pretty hurt to see how it went. All right. Did I ramble too much?

[00:24:02] **Speaker 1** No, it was fine. I think we're good here. All right, so, we're going to just get a couple cutaways. Sure of him. You just chatting? Yeah. Okay. You really need me in it, but just a couple more angles.