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After top Democrat alleges finger-gun threat, Brownback-connected lobbyist steps down

A former chief of staff and close confidant of Gov. Sam Brownback has left his role lobbying for a state prison project after the top Democrat in the Kansas Senate accused the man of threatening him. David Kensinger, Brownback's former chief of staff and a prominent Topeka lobbyist, said Wednesday morning in a statement that he had resigned his role with CoreCivic Inc. Prison officials had said that CoreCivic, formerly known as Corrections Corporation of America, would design, build, finance and maintain a new Lansing prison, but that the state would staff and operate it. The project has proven to be controversial and unable to clear a necessary final vote in recent weeks. Senate Minority Leader Anthony Hensley, a Topeka Democrat, told The Star on Tuesday that he had filed a report with Capitol Police saying that Kensinger made a threatening gesture in the hallway outside the Kansas Senate. Hensley has been openly critical of the Lansing project. "David Kensinger made a gesture at me like he was shooting me with a gun. He mouthed the word, 'Boom,'" Hensley said. Kensinger initially responded questions from The Star by emailing a photograph of former "Baywatch" star David Hasselhoff with his fingers in the shape of a gun. "Seriously?" Kensinger said in the email Tuesday. On Wednesday, in an email to The Star, Kensinger said: "Something this silly shouldn't be a distraction from a great project. Happy to step aside as the project succeeds on its own merits." A corrections spokesman declined to comment Wednesday morning. Critics of the Lansing plan said earlier that the process has been rushed and the financing method is questionable for replacing the state's largest prison. They've called for more review and questioned the cost to taxpayers. The proposal, which would cost Kansas roughly \$362 million over 20 years, calls for a 1,920-bed maximum- and medium-security unit and a 512-bed minimum-security unit that would be built over two years. The new prison would be more efficient, the corrections department has said, with a staff of 371, down from 682 positions needed in the current prison. Scrutiny over the project continued after The Star revealed late last year that Kensinger and another former Brownback staffer were registered as lobbying on behalf of CoreCivic. Brownback's office said in late November that it was not involved in the selection of CoreCivic. After delaying an earlier vote on the project, the State Finance Council, which includes Brownback, is expected to take up the Lansing project Wednesday afternoon.