Inside how Trump's migrant detention warehouse plan fell apart

The federal government bought massive warehouses for migrant detention centers before answering basic questions about sewage, safety and local support. Then the problems began.

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BETA

Ask USA TODAY anything
How much did DHS pay for the Social Circle warehouse?
What is the capacity of the Folkston ICE Processing Center?
Why was the warehouse initiative abandoned after leadership change?

AI Overview

Full Summary

The Trump administration's plan to expand migrant detention through a network of massive warehouse 'mega centers' has largely collapsed due to infrastructure failures, local opposition, and legal challenges. While the Department of Homeland Security attempted to convert commercial warehouses into large-scale facilities, projects in multiple states faced significant hurdles regarding sewage, water, and safety requirements.

SOCIAL CIRCLE, GA – When federal officials revealed plans for a 10,000-bed immigration detention center in this tiny Trump-loving community, locals had lots of questions. Among them: How, exactly, are you planning to flush the toilets?

Envisioned as a core part of a network of Amazon-like warehouse “mega centers” housing migrants facing deportation, the building sits at the corner of an

industrial park less than 50 miles east of downtown Atlanta and is large enough to fit 17 football fields. The project would have dwarfed the more than 200 migrant detention facilities operating nationwide today.

Social Circle officials said the Department of Homeland Security lacked the kinds of detailed plans necessary to move the project forward, including access to wastewater treatment for thousands of detainees and as many 2,500 workers. They also said DHS significantly overpaid for the property.

“DHS was secretive and did not engage with us until after they purchased the building,” Social Circle City Manager Eric Taylor told USA TODAY. “Perhaps if they had been more transparent and performed the due diligence that federal law requires, they would have seen that it wasn’t going to work.”

Ultimately, federal officials largely abandoned their $1 billion warehouse plan following a DHS leadership change. By then, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement initiative had also run into a buzzsaw of opposition in many communities, including those who otherwise backed the president’s policies.

Across six states, USA TODAY found that DHS repeatedly advanced warehouse detention projects before resolving fundamental infrastructure and regulatory questions, provoking lawsuits and local resistance that helped stall or sink several of the facilities.

Many local officials said they were blindsided by the warehouse projects in their communities. Like those in Social Circle, they first learned of the dramatic new approach from news media reports. Other opponents said warehousing migrants was inhumane.

Speaking about the initiative in June, DHS Secretary Markwayne Mullin told Congress "there was some due diligence that maybe wasn't actually checked off. ... We're going through and reevaluating every one of them to be the best possible outcome for our mission inside of DHS."

The Government Accountability Office reached a similar conclusion in a bluntly worded audit released in September, saying ICE had already wasted about $20 million, including expenditures for zoning assessments, title insurance, utilities, security and other services. The audit also said ICE might waste even more money if it's unable to sell the warehouses for the prices it paid.

DHS is now selling seven of the warehouses it bought. And at least two other warehouse sites are on hold, even as taxpayers continue to pay to keep their lights on.

"We stated from the beginning that the detention center was a poor fit for the community, as we simply do not have the water and sewer infrastructure to support effectively tripling the population overnight," Taylor said. "A simple phone call would have saved the federal government $129 million."

DHS officials declined repeated requests to explain what drove the warehouse initiative or what prompted them to abandon it. The Trump administration also did not explain its reversal in court records responding to Social Circle's lawsuit.

In a statement the agency attributed to an unnamed spokesperson, DHS said it wants deportees removed "at lightning speed," and that it routinely evaluates different methods.

"From day one, DHS has remained singularly focused on removing the worst of the worst criminal illegal aliens from the United States and is always evaluating the best methods to do so," DHS said. "These heinous criminals, once arrested, should be removed at lightning speed, not housed on American soil at the taxpayer's expense. DHS is moving swiftly to utilize EXISTING detention space with our state and county partners."

Amy Fischer of Amnesty International USA said the failure of the warehouse initiative reflects two problems: ICE has never been good at planning and

budgeting, and the agency is now so flush with cash it can afford to waste money. But she said ICE also appears to have miscalculated public support for mass detentions. Amnesty International has called to abolish ICE, arguing the agency is beyond reform.

"They bought up a bunch of facilities without a real plan and then when the rubber hit the road, it was harder than they anticipated," said Fischer, the nonprofit's director of refugee and migrant rights. "But because they have so much money they were just willing to take the loss and move on."

While ICE has largely backed away from its warehouse project, it continues to expand detention capacity by using existing and more traditional detention sites. Its number of detention facilities has more than doubled since the beginning of Trump's second presidential term, from 134 to 272, according to the GAO report.

As of July, there were nearly 66,000 people in immigration detention, up 66% from January of 2025, when Trump returned to the White House, according to a USA TODAY analysis of the most recent federal data. DHS plans to increase daily detention capacity to at least 100,000 beds, according to the GAO report.

But the report's authors said that without a comprehensive plan for how to reach that number – or how to pay for it once funding from the 2025 GOP-backed spending law known as the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act" expires in a few years – taxpayers may end up spending more than necessary.

DHS fumbled more than just the warehouse initiative, the GAO found. In examining the administration's efforts to house detainees at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, GAO investigators said the government wasted $2.8 million setting up tent housing that was never used. Further, they found ICE spent $43 million from October 2024 to June 2026 on Guantanamo Bay detentions, even though the site averaged just 16 detainees a day for most of that time.

"Changing plans and high operating costs have resulted in incurring unnecessary costs, which resulted in waste at Guantanamo Bay," the GAO said.

The GAO also criticized how DHS handled the Florida detention site known as "Alligator Alcatraz," which closed in June. Although the site was owned and operated by Florida state officials and DHS had no official role in its management, the Trump administration considered it an "integral" part of the detention system and paid Florida $608.4 million to run it. The GAO said DHS paid Florida the equivalent of $249 per person, per day, to house migrants, well above ICE's median cost of $92.

“In the absence of a comprehensive strategic plan to guide detention expansion, ICE has wasted funds on unsuccessful detention initiatives and lacks important information about the long-term affordability of its investments,” the GAO report concluded. “Further, without taking action to manage detention investments in accordance with program and project management practices, ICE will likely continue to make uninformed decisions and risk further inefficiency and wasted resources.”

The small town that faced off against a federal giant

Migrant detention facilities are usually operated by private contractors, including GEO Group and CoreCivic, or they are run in partnership with local jails or the U.S. Marshals Service.

The warehouse effort – formally known as the Detention Reengineering Initiative – would have reshaped the entire system. Instead of a network of more than 200 existing detention sites, DHS planned to funnel detainees into 34. Eight of them would have been "mega" sites, each housing up to 10,000 people.

One of them was planned for Social Circle.

Home to about 5,000 people, Social Circle's historic town center boasts an ice cream shop, car mechanic, real estate broker and other small businesses. A bedroom community of Atlanta, the city has been struggling to maintain its identity while balancing the growth of industrial warehouses and data centers.

Social Circle's founders incorporated the city in 1832 along a Native American trail that once served as a boundary between the Cherokee and Muscogee nations. In 1864, Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's troops tore along that trail on their March to the Sea, burning parts of Social Circle and destroying its railroad tracks. The city underscores this history on signs posted throughout its one-stoplight downtown, which is part of the historic district listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The city mostly sits in Walton County, which backed Trump with more than 70% of the vote in the 2020 and 2024 elections. Making tough immigration enforcement a centerpiece of his campaigns, Trump vowed to unleash tens of thousands of ICE agents around the country.

In early February, DHS bought a warehouse off East Hightower Trail for $128 million, nearly five times its assessed value, according to real estate records. The 1-million-square-foot building features 40-foot ceilings and 140 loading docks.

The looming warehouse sits less than a mile away from a church and just up the road from an elementary school. Dart Container Corp., known for manufacturing Solo cups and other plastic items, does business across the street. A General Mills facility operates around the corner.

Federal officials planned to transform the warehouse into one of the nation's largest immigration detention centers in the nation with holding rooms, court facilities, cafeterias and a gun range. And they planned to have it running by this month.

John Miller, a Trump supporter from Social Circle, credited the president for making significant progress in reversing illegal immigration. But he said he was

also "extremely frustrated" by how the administration approached the warehouse initiative. Miller helped organize opposition to it through the One Circle Community Coalition. Meanwhile, he is concerned about what will happen if the federal government can't sell the warehouse.

"I don’t know who they are going to get to buy it for anywhere near what they paid for it. We need it to go back to private use as soon as possible so it can be added back to the tax rolls," Miller said of the warehouse.

'There is nothing that DHS could have done to gain our support'

Today, the largest immigration detention center is Camp East Montana on the Fort Bliss military base in El Paso, Texas. On any given day, up to 5,000 migrants are detained there in conditions DHS has acknowledged have at times violated its own internal standards.

By opening Camp East Montana on the military base, DHS officials largely bypassed local objections, zoning rules and other restrictions that critics might have raised. They also made it almost impossible for the public or elected officials to visit it.

In contrast, while the warehouse sites themselves would have likely been exempt from local zoning rules, ICE’s decision to buy commercial properties opened them up to local and state review on everything from drinking water availability and fire safety to how much wastewater they would generate.

In several communities, including Social Circle, USA TODAY found, federal officials appear to have taken a buy-first, plan-later approach. In some cases, the agency did little due diligence to ensure local officials would approve their plans or build public support that might have overridden any local objections, city and state government leaders told USA TODAY.

Social Circle officials said they first found out about the warehouse plan from news reports in late 2025, and only started getting more specifics from ICE in February 2026. Among them: ICE planned to hold detainees in the warehouse within seven months.

ICE's February update raised more questions than answers, city officials said. Chief among them was a reliance on connecting to a wastewater treatment system 7 miles from the city and not under the city's control. City officials said their municipal wastewater treatment plant lacked the necessary capacity, and that ICE's plans to store or possibly treat sewage on site raised even more questions. They sued to stop the project. Taylor, the city manager, said Social Circle put a lock on the warehouse's water meter.

"From our perspective, there is nothing that DHS could have done to gain our support," Taylor said, "especially with the timeline they were proposing."

Planning for the 'worst-case scenario'

Nearly 50 miles north of Social Circle, DHS bought a 540,408-square-foot warehouse in Oakwood, Georgia, paying $68.2 million for it in late 2025.

Oakwood city officials were caught off guard by the federal government's proposal to turn it into an immigration detention center. They said it would cost $4.3 million for municipal sewer service while wiping out $771,071 in annual property tax revenue because federal properties are typically exempt from taxes.

At the time, city leaders also fretted they'd have to spend at least $215,000 for new safety equipment, including riot gear, to manage protests they expected would target the facility.

They said the first official contact they had from ICE was a letter announcing the agency planned to sell the warehouse after abandoning the project.

In a February 2026 statement, Republican U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde, who represents the Oakwood area, said he'd been assured by federal officials they carefully selected the site after reviewing everything from the ventilation systems to utility services. Clyde said he was told the facility would create 1,500 temporary renovation jobs and more than 400 permanent positions, while contributing hundreds of millions of dollars to the local economy.

"The final selection of the facility was predicated on a 'No Detrimental Effect' determination," Clyde said in a statement. "Based on ICE's economic impact analysis, track record, and unwavering commitment to protecting the American people, I am confident that the Oakwood ICE facility will be a safe and prosperous addition to the Ninth District."

The following month, Oakwood City Manager B.R. White referred to the Trump administration's ramped-up immigration enforcement in Minneapolis, saying his community was "having to plan for the worst-case scenario in the event that what happened in Minnesota happens here."

Ultimately, Oakwood's City Council unanimously approved a resolution calling on ICE to halt the warehouse project.

ICE put the facility on hold. And in June, federal officials announced they'd try to sell the warehouse in Oakwood, along with six others, including the one in Social Circle.

A surprise in Surprise, Arizona

ICE told a federal judge earlier this year it's still committed to using a 418,400-square-foot warehouse in Surprise, Arizona, that it bought for about $70 million in January. The building, painted tan and brown with orange details, sits in an industrial area about 4 miles from City Hall.

DHS officials said the Surprise building would be filled with the "worst of the worst," a phrase often used by Trump to describe immigrants with violent

criminal records, from murderous gang members to rapists and drug dealers. Residents in this city northwest of Phoenix have sparred over whether they want detainees like that in their backyards.

Surprise resident Steven Julian, who lives about 5 miles from the site, said he thinks the country needs more detention capacity. ICE generally does good work, he added, and the warehouse project could create more jobs.

"We've got a real problem with illegals," Julian, 64, said as he posed for a photo wearing an “ICE” hat signed by former DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, who approved the warehouse initiative. "They're not all bad, but we have too many."

DHS estimated there were 290,000 people living without legal status in Arizona in 2022, just under 4% of the state's population that year. More recent numbers were not available.

Critics pointed out the warehouse in Surprise sits near homes, a facility storing hazardous chemicals and Dysart high and middle schools. Many Dysart High School students walk past the warehouse on their way to and from school, said Cali Overs, 18, an alumna who is concerned about the potential for more ICE officers, traffic and protests.

"I feel like it's something that both sides can come together on," the former Dysart High School student body vice president said. "Because if you're going to say that the worst of the worst are in these buildings, why would you want it?"

Business owners in the region are worried about how an immigration detention center could impact traffic, deliveries and public safety, said Raoul Sada, president and CEO of the Northwest Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"The chamber's concern is the continuing of operations," Sada said. "Can employees get to and from work?"

City officials said there was little they could do to stop the project.

"The federal government purchased the land," Surprise Mayor Kevin Sartor said in March. "And whether we want it here or not, they're here."

Months later, Sartor said the city's questions about the project largely remain unanswered.

"I have repeatedly said that the city must be able to plan responsibly, protect public safety, and provide accurate information to residents," Sartor said in a statement. "That has been hard to do with the level of communication and detail that we have received at this point, and it is frustrating as someone entrusted with leading this community."

State officials have sued to halt the project, and ICE said it will complete an environmental assessment before moving ahead. The project remains on hold pending that assessment.

Before ICE put the Surprise project on hold, officials said the warehouse would have been renovated and operated by GardaWorld Federal, the U.S. subsidiary of a Canada-based security contractor that helped run Alligator Alcatraz.

ICE has awarded a $313 million renovation and operations contract for the Surprise warehouse project, according to the GAO report. No detainees are being held there.

On hold in San Antonio

Early this year, DHS bought a 640,000-square-foot warehouse in San Antonio, planning to house at least 1,500 detainees there. City officials said the existing

sewer system was not designed to handle that many people, and the expansion could potentially require 15 times the capacity. DHS paid $66.1 million for the warehouse, which had an assessed value of $37 million, according to the city.

San Antonio officials on Oct. 13 sued to block DHS from proceeding.

"In their rush to convert warehouses into Amazon-like store-and-ship facilities for immigrants, defendants have trampled over federal law designed to protect the city and other stakeholders' interests," San Antonio officials said in their lawsuit. "Detainees would be forced to live in the facility around-the-clock and indefinitely, even though the warehouse's utilities were only set up to support warehouse employees during working hours."

San Antonio officials said ICE failed to address how it would handle the storage of potentially tens of thousands of gallons of fuel for backup generators, discarded detainee food or potentially infectious and hazardous waste from on-site medical facilities.

The project remains on hold, and city officials told the judge they are negotiating with DHS over how to proceed. They plan to update the judge by Nov. 30.

Salt Lake Mega Center plan abandoned

Salt Lake City officials said they were surprised when DHS bought a 833,000-square-foot warehouse with plans to transform it into the "Salt Lake Mega Center," housing up to 10,000 migrants. The project, according to the city, would have exacerbated drought conditions, required a massive expansion of wastewater treatment facilities and clogged local roads with extra traffic.

Federal officials bought the warehouse on the city's west side in March for $145.4 million. In a court filing, city officials said ICE applied for utility services at the end of May but never provided specifics: "The application did not provide any information on anticipated water and sewer needs, labeling all details as 'TBD.'"

The city sued to halt the project.

"This is part of a pattern. Defendants have rushed to purchase and convert several warehouses across the country ..." Salt Lake City officials told a judge in their June 8 lawsuit. "The lack of collaboration and communication is particularly concerning given the Salt Lake Mega Center will have significant immediate and long-term effects on the city, the county, and their residents."

DHS in July agreed to halt the project, and the warehouse is now up for sale. In court filings, DHS officials gave no explanation for why they were abandoning the initiative.

Immigration detention still expanding

While the warehouse initiative appears largely defunct, ICE continues to expand.

About an hour's drive north of Jacksonville, Florida, sits the privately-operated Folkston ICE Processing Center near Folkston, Georgia. The facility last year nearly tripled its capacity by annexing the neighboring D. Ray James Correctional Facility under a contract with ICE. The complex has about 3,000 beds, making it one of the largest detention sites in the country. Federal lawmakers said about 2,200 people are detained there.

The detention complex will pay the city about $600,000 annually in water and sewer fees. Folkston City Manager Pender Lloyd said money from the expanded facility helped the city afford a $26 million wastewater treatment plant expansion.

"It's a good economic boost for us. We have very little industry here," Lloyd said, adding: "Everybody here sees it as a benefit. They're not really worried about the protests and all that, you know. It's not affecting us. It's well-run and organized and they don't see a problem with it."

The center's critics said it has a dangerous past. During the Biden administration in November 2021, federal investigators found the center did not meet staffing levels required by its contract with ICE to properly oversee detainees and did not provide "timely access to specialty care or adequate mental health care," according to a DHS Office of Inspector General inspection report.

"Folkston facilities were unsanitary and dilapidated," the report found, "with torn mattresses, water leaks and standing water, mold growth and water damage, rundown showers, mold and debris in the ventilation system, insect infestations, lack of access to hot showers, inoperable toilets, an inoperable thermometer display on a kitchen freezer, and an absence of hot meals."

The facility has also been the subject of human rights complaints, including allegations of psychological and physical abuse as well as expired food being served to detainees, said Daniela Rodriguez, who leads Migrant Equity Southeast, which advocates for immigrant rights in South Georgia.

In early October, more than 70 detainees launched a hunger strike over conditions inside the facility, according to U.S. Sens. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, both Democrats. They called for DHS officials to conduct a surprise inspection.

"The town has put the community in a situation where they have to work in a place where they witness human rights suffering in order to make enough to pay their bills," Rodriguez said. "It's a very rural community that deserves so much more."

On Oct. 23, a detainee being held at the Folkston ICE Processing Center died after being found with a ligature around his neck. The cause of death of Luis Sandoval, 48, has not yet been released. Sandoval was detained by ICE in early October and had been held at Folkston since Oct. 8, ICE said.

ICE has also contracted with the GEO Group to open an approximately 1,200-bed detention center in an unused prison in Hudson, Colorado, about 30 miles northeast of Denver. That five-year deal is worth about $525 million, according to the GEO Group.

Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser has sued to stop the expansion, arguing similar projects have previously required environmental and community impact analyses. That is similar to the arguments made by Georgia and Arizona officials.

The expansion has sparked protests in the town of about 2,000 people, including one led by Jeanette Vizguerra, a longtime immigrant rights activist who is facing deportation after repeated detentions inside a GEO facility in Aurora, Colorado.

“In their rush to expand detention capacity across the country, DHS and ICE have ignored their legal obligation to first determine what effect their actions would have on nearby residents and the surrounding environment …” Weiser said in his lawsuit. “Instead, defendants have operated under a shroud of secrecy in their plans for the facility, displaying a complete disregard for these requirements.”

The GEO Group did not respond to a request for comment.

An uncertain future for the warehouse in Social Circle

In Social Circle, city officials remain hopeful someone new will buy the warehouse ICE had planned to transform into an immigration detention center. It is less than 5 miles from the Meta Stanton Springs Data Center, which is involved in a separate lawsuit with the local community.

As with most of the other warehouses the Trump administration bought, the property is listed for sale on a special website run by commercial real estate

brokerage Cushman & Wakefield. Bidders have until Nov. 12 to submit offers. The government did not provide a public asking price or minimum bid.

Taylor, the city manager, said he's hopeful a manufacturer or distributor will buy the 235-acre site, potentially Rivian, which is building an automotive plant about 5 miles away.

“But," he said, "we haven’t heard of anything yet."