

Federal Officials Inspect Thomson Prison

Federal Inspectors Tour Thomson Prison

All eyes were focused on Thomson Prison Monday when federal inspectors arrived early to tour the facility and evaluate its suitability for housing detainees transferred from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Local and state officials were invited for an afternoon meeting to discuss any and all questions and concerns they may have about how the purchase of Thomson Correctional Center by the Federal Bureau of Prisons would impact the local communities. Among those invited to the discussion were Fulton's Mayor Larry Russell and City Administrator Randy Balk.

"What we saw today is that they brought the A team," Mayor Russell said. "The head of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a senior person from the department of defense, and 11 or 12 people to analyze the situation. It's the real deal. Whether they meant to say it or not, a couple of the people said that Thomson was the leading facility."

"My impression of the visit was very positive about what might happen if this comes here," Administrator Balk said. "The jobs are going to be more. You're going to have 3000 potential jobs, so that's larger than what they projected for the other opening; and an \$85 million budget per year to run the prison, which is amazing. It looks like a very positive thing for our region. It was a good afternoon and I think it would really be a blessing for our region in a lot of economic development ways."

Alderman Leorup seemed to clearly sum up the overall debate about the potential of Thomson housing some of the Guantanamo Bay detainees when he explained that his household's opinion was split; he is for it because of the positive economic impact, but his wife is concerned about the safety of the communities.

The Proposal

The Federal Government is considering the possible acquisition to the Thomson Correctional Facility from the State of Illinois. This is only one of several possible alternatives at this point, and no decisions have been made.

Thomson Correctional Center is a Level 1 adult male maximum-security facility comprised of 1,600 cells. The facility also has a 200-bed minimum-security unit which currently houses 144 inmates.

If purchased, the Federal Bureau of Prisons would operate the facility as a maximum-security prison with federal inmates and lease a portion to the Defense Department to house a limited number of Guantanamo detainees.

The Thomson facility has several benefits with respect to security, which is why it is under consideration.

Security

No detainees transferred from Guantanamo to the United States will be released domestically. These detainees are not allowed any visitors other than their legal council.

For any facility used by the Federal Government to house detainees from Guantanamo, the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI work closely with state and local law enforcement to share relevant information to address any risks.

During the press conference following the inspection the question was raised as to whether housing these detainees would "put Thomson on the map" as a high priority target for terrorism attacks. Harley Lappin, the Director of the Federal Bureau of prisons addressed the question by explaining that there are other federal prison around the United States in

which detained are housed, many of whom have participated in terrorist activities on US soil. In those prisons, with the increased intelligence, there has been no increase in terrorist threats to those areas.

The Thomson facility was designed as a state-of-the art, maximum-security prison but the Defense Department would add security measures including additional external perimeter security that would exceed those at any federal prison in the nation.

Economic Impact

The preliminary economic impact analysis showed that the facility would generate between 2340 and 3259 ongoing jobs. The Federal Bureau of Prisons would employ between 800 and 900 people. Director Lappin stated that about 250 - 300 of those jobs would be current federal employees transferring in from other facilities. The remainder of the jobs would be filled with newly hired employees who met qualifications. He indicated that current employees of the prison would be given every consideration and assistance to attain those positions.

The Department of Defense would employ between 800 and 1200 people, most of whom would be military personnel.

The analysis predicts that unemployment in the region would be significantly reduced. For example, the unemployment rate in Carroll County could be cut in half from its September 2009 level of 10.5%. Unemployment would also decline in Whiteside, Jo Daviess, Lee, and Rock Island counties in Illinois, and Clinton and Jackson counties in Iowa.

The analysis predicts a large and immediate impact on the local economies surrounding the facility including a boost to local utilities, transportation, food services, as well as a boost to local suppliers of goods and services due to the need for housing, health care, retail goods, etc. by the employees of the facility.

The analysis estimates that the overall injection of funds into the local economy would be between \$790 million and \$1.09 billion over the first 4 years.

Officials at the prison Monday would give no time-line or date as to when the final decision will be made about the purchase of Thomson Correctional.

Courtesy of the Fulton Journal