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Acquiring New Prison Sites: The Federal Experience

Wade B. Houk

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With the population of Federal prisons now almost 60 percent over capacity, part of the long-term solution to crowding involves developing new institutions. As a result, the Federal Bureau of Prisons is engaged in the largest facilities expansion program in its history.

This *Construction Bulletin* describes how the Federal prison system selects and acquires sites for new institutions—a process that may offer suggestions for State and local officials facing this difficult issue.

To minimize time and expense, the Bureau of Prisons first looks for existing facilities that might be acquired and converted to correctional use. If these are not available, development of new institutions from the ground up is the next alternative for adding capacity.

From the Director

The dilemma of too many serious crimes with injured victims and not enough space to incarcerate convicted criminals is a major domestic policy issue. Convicted violent and repeat serious offenders have contributed to swelling prison and jail populations which outstrip capacity in many jurisdictions.

The gravity of the problem is recognized by officials throughout the criminal justice system. In fact, when the National Institute of Justice asked criminal justice officials to name the most serious problem facing the system, police, courts, and corrections officials reached a virtually unanimous consensus: prison and jail crowding is the number one concern.

Attorney General Edwin Meese III has spoken out repeatedly on the dimensions of the crisis and the need to help State and local jurisdictions find less costly ways to increase corrections capacity so convicted serious criminals

are prevented from preying on people, communities, and our economy.

Responding to the need, the National Institute of Justice established the *Construction Information Exchange* to help State and local officials make informed decisions on building or expanding facilities.

These *Construction Bulletins* further that initiative by helping States and localities learn about programs that have succeeded in other jurisdictions—ideas and approaches that may work in theirs as well.

This *Construction Bulletin* sets forth the experience of Federal officials who have faced the problem of finding sites for prisons.

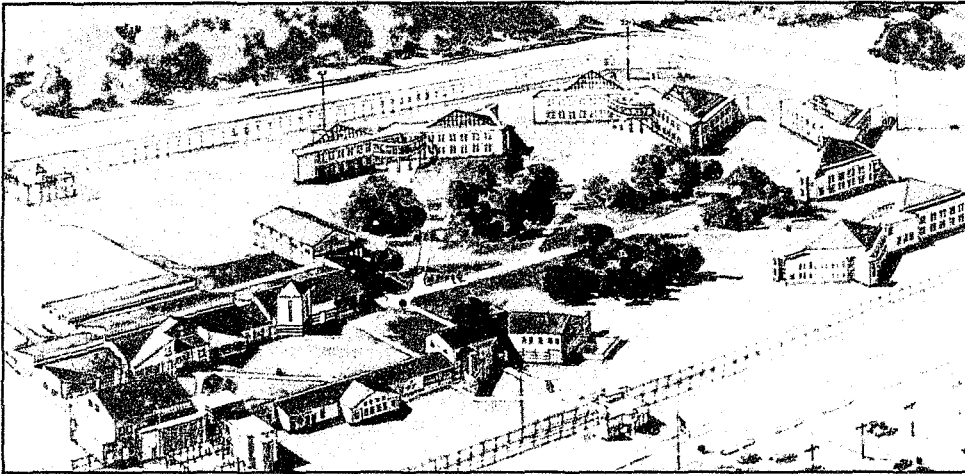
The Bureau of Prisons has enjoyed considerable success in achieving community support for what is often an unpopular issue. Of particular note is the donation of land by local officials to encourage the construction of a prison in their communities.

While the Bureau of Prisons does not claim to have all the answers, we feel that this *Construction Bulletin* will offer helpful advice to State and local agencies now searching for places to build jails and prisons.

In addition to these *Bulletins*, the National Institute of Justice has also published a *National Directory of Corrections Construction*, based on the results of a national survey, which provides a wealth of information on construction methods and costs for jails and prisons built since 1978.

The National Institute also maintains, at our National Criminal Justice Reference Service, a computerized data base on corrections construction. Through this *Construction Information Exchange*, those planning to build or expand facilities are put in touch with officials in other jurisdictions who have successfully used more efficient building techniques.

James K. Stewart
Director
National Institute of Justice



New Federal prison at Fairton, New Jersey

Traditionally, the major hurdle in new construction has been site acquisition. Finding a suitable site that a local community was willing to put to institutional use often took several years prior to design and construction. Thus 5 years' lead time might be required to acquire a suitable site and to design, construct, and activate a new prison.

Due to increasing population pressures, the Bureau of Prisons has streamlined its approach to facilities development, and the current approach calls for activation of new prisons within 2 years of the appropriations and funding. This means the Bureau moves through site acquisition, planning, design, and activation in a shorter cycle than ever before.

Selection criteria

What first triggers the acquisition process is identification of sufficient numbers of inmates from a specific locale to justify a new permanent facility in that area. After a general part of the country is designated for site selection, the Bureau advises State Chambers of Commerce, regional economic development associations, and State Departments of Corrections that it is interested in considering potential sites.

The Bureau's comprehensive plan for evaluating potential sites includes such technical criteria as development suitability, hazards avoidance, and availability of special resources. But

it also includes such basic factors as these:

- Endorsement by local officials and Members of Congress together with broad local support.
- About 200 to 250 acres with adequate visual buffers along the outer boundaries. A smaller parcel may be acceptable depending on local circumstances, topography, and desirability.
- Location within 50 miles of a large population center (50,000 or more people) to ensure community resources for the facility—housing, potential staff, and goods and services.
- An accredited full-service hospital, recognized and licensed by the State in which it is located, within 1 hour's distance.
- Fire protection services, with a public-service fire company preferred.
- Higher education facilities nearby, with accredited colleges or universities and a wide variety of technical schools.
- Accessibility to public transportation and major highway systems, preferably with commercial ground and air service nearby.
- Adequate or expandable public utilities.

The Bureau places high priority on site selection for prisons in a community setting, unlike the remote areas favored for prison sites in the past. Regardless of the security level planned, new facilities are located at or near a defined community primarily because of the availability of employees and support services.

Public reaction

In the past the Bureau usually initiated contacts with community leaders to explore developing a new facility in the area. But since the Bureau adopted its new, more active approach, aggressive site searches are combined with an information program stressing the significant economic benefits of correctional facilities.

As a result, local officials often solicit the Bureau to have their communities considered. With unemployment high and local economies ailing in many parts of the country, local leaders often see a potential Federal prison as a recession-proof economic base.

Whenever approached, the Bureau of Prisons tries to be responsive to all inquiries and will visit almost any proposed location. Such availability and visibility, the Bureau finds, often brings leads to other possibilities.

One of the most difficult and potentially adverse events in the site selection process is premature disclosure of a proposed project, resulting in negative community reaction. With caution and diplomacy, the Bureau discusses its plans with community leaders as a first step. If their reaction is favorable, an intensive public information effort comes next.

The Bureau works to familiarize the community with the Bureau's operations and the types of facilities it develops. The site acquisition staff from the Bureau's Office of Facilities Development and Operations makes presentations to local business and civic groups to acquaint them with the benefits associated with locating a correctional facility in their area.

Frequently, communities organize a local task force early in the process to mobilize support for the prison proposal. It is not uncommon for opposing groups to organize similarly. This increased community awareness and involvement often leads to controversy.

Thus, maximum discretion is essential in identifying potential sites. Until it is determined that a community is receptive and that sites with the necessary potential are available, untimely

publicity may jeopardize the outcome. Sensitive handling of the proposal by a core group of community leaders is critical before proceeding to full public review of a project.

When a public education program is launched in a community, it stresses the potential economic benefits. Many fears are allayed by letting community groups tour existing institutions similar to the one proposed for their area, giving them a chance to talk with staff and meet with their community counterparts.

If a preliminary technical feasibility study proves a site unacceptable, the Bureau lets the community know this result. If there are major obstacles to one site, sometimes the community offers alternatives.

Priority considerations

With limited resources, the Bureau's first priority must be cost benefit. The maximum number of beds must be built. Therefore, the Bureau looks first at—

- existing Federal property;
- surplus Federal property;
- existing facilities suitable for low-cost conversion; and finally,
- improved land for new construction.

The Bureau seeks land that would be donated at nominal cost with an acceptable infrastructure (roads, utilities in place or readily available). If infrastructure improvements are required, many times they can be funded from local sources or State grants, allowing more Federal money for actual construction.

For example, in Marianna, Florida, Fairton (Fairfield), New Jersey, and Bradford, Pennsylvania, land was purchased by the community and donated at no Federal cost; State funds are paying for infrastructure improvements.

Federal agencies sometimes acquire needed property through condemnation proceedings. The Bureau of Prisons avoids condemnation, preferring to gain community support, and also tries to abide by local land use and zoning regulations to the greatest extent possible.

Environmental consequences

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 governs "major Federal actions" affecting the environment. Since development of new correctional facilities is clearly a "major Federal action," the Bureau of Prisons must analyze all the environmental issues associated with the proposed project.

An Environmental Impact Statement becomes the vehicle for analyzing all the environmental issues and the basis for deciding to proceed or cancel. Until the time-consuming and complicated process of the impact statement is complete, the agency's plans are only "proposals" and no firm decision can be made.

The overwhelming environmental concern is a new prison's effect on the quality of life in the host community. Environmental issues must be properly monitored and presented for public review in an easily understood format. Most communities want to know whether a new Federal prison will—

Jeopardize our town's safety and security?

Adversely affect property and housing values near the prison?

Adversely affect city schools and other community services?

Burden local law enforcement agencies?

Consume all our water supply and sewage capacity?

Intrude visually on neighboring properties?

Give our town the reputation of "a prison town"?

On the positive side, more than a few citizens have another important question: "How can I get a job?"

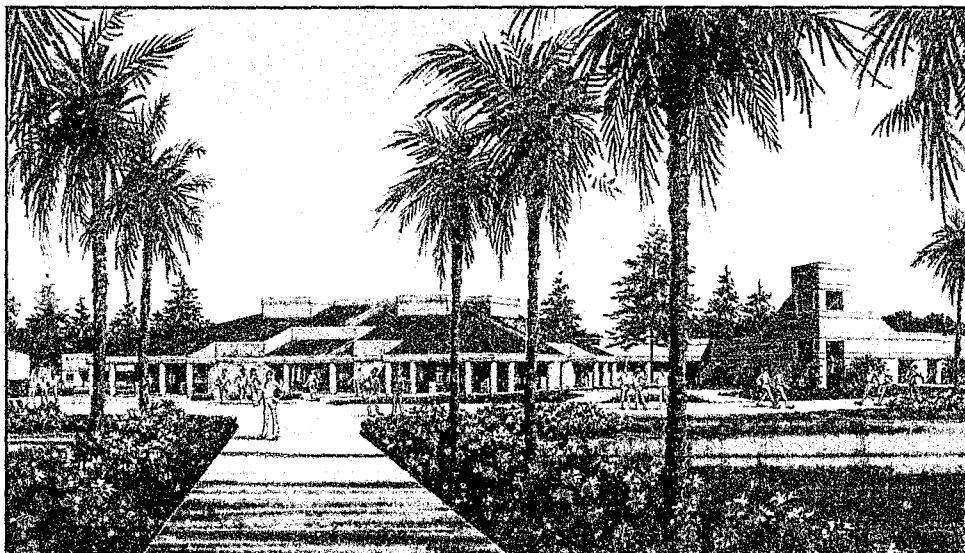
No environmental issue or public concern can be overlooked or underestimated if officials are to gain cooperation and acceptance by the community. This must be a primary objective of the site acquisition effort.

Because expansion by the Federal Bureau of Prisons into communities throughout the country will result in many local changes, the Bureau strives to be responsive to community concerns at this planning phase. The Bureau of Prisons considers community acceptance and support essential to an institution's effectiveness and success in meeting its goals.

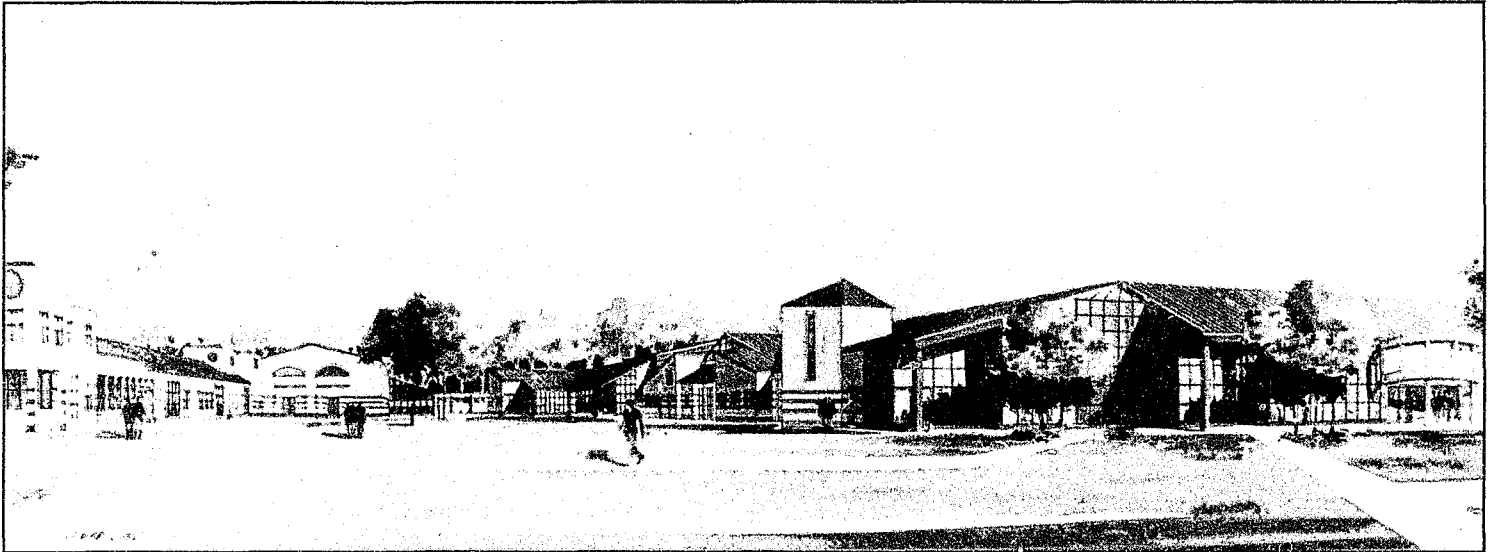
About the author . . .

Wade B. Houk has been Assistant Director for Administration, Federal Bureau of Prisons, since 1982. His division's responsibilities include facilities development and operations, budget development, and financial management as well as information systems.

Construction Bulletins are part of the research conducted under "New Directions in Construction and Finance of Correctional Institutions," a National Institute of Justice project directed by Charles B. DeWitt, an Institute research fellow. Comments and suggestions about the *Bulletins* may be sent to Mr. DeWitt at the National Institute of Justice, 633 Indiana Avenue NW., Washington DC 20531.



The new Federal prison at Marianna, Florida, built on land donated to the Bureau of Prisons



The site for the prison in Sheridan, Oregon, was selected as a result of the process described in this *Construction Bulletin*.

Where to turn for more help...

The *Construction Information Exchange* has more information on this and other projects. The *Construction Information Exchange* is a Federal initiative that provides information on construction methods and costs for jails and prisons built since 1978. Through the Exchange, those planning to build or expand facilities are put in touch with officials in other jurisdictions who have successfully used efficient building techniques. An automated data base contains a wide range of information on

hundreds of completed programs. Publications include these *Bulletins* and the *National Directory of Corrections Construction*, covering building methods and costs for more than 100 prisons and jails. For more information, or to submit information for inclusion in the Exchange, contact:

Construction Information
Exchange/NCJRS
Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20850
**Telephone: 800-851-3420
or 301-251-5500**

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