

Louisiana nears deal to buy Tallulah prison spot

By Paul Bryant

[04/19/07]**TALLULAH** - On the western edge of town on U.S. 65, a prison turned rehabilitation center is surrounded by fences and barbed wire in an impoverished community. Crumbling, vacant buildings line downtown streets. Abandoned properties and littered lots abound.



Moses Williams talks about the Steve Hoyle Rehabilitation Center in Tallulah. (Meredith Spencer • The Vicksburg Post)

It's an image Moses Williams wants to change.

“The situation we have here is going to require extraordinary work,” he said. “More money is not going to solve the problem if you're pouring it into the same hole. If we focus on education and start creating jobs, we will improve the quality of life and sustain communities.”

The focus starts at the Steve Hoyle Rehabilitation Center, said Williams, the CEO of Northeast Louisiana Delta Community Development Corporation.

“Louisiana cannot put enough people with alcohol problems in there to justify spending that

money,” he said. “The more people we incarcerate, the bigger the problem becomes for us. It's like encouraging a person with lung cancer to smoke.”

The Swanson Correctional Center for Youth-Madison Parish Unit became the Steve Hoyle Rehabilitation Center in June 2004, 10 years after the state-funded, privately owned and operated juvenile detention center opened. In the three years since its closure, Gov. Kathleen Blanco signed Act 721 authorizing the creation of the Northeast Louisiana Delta Learning Center and the state has been negotiating with the center's owner, FBA LLC, to acquire the property.

A spokesman with the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections said despite the legislation, the Steve Hoyle center will probably remain a “long-term correction facility.”

“It's the only one of its kind in the state, particularly for people with multiple DUI convictions, as well as for people with other substance-abuse problems,” Pam LaBourd said.

The state is nearing a deal to acquire the property, LaBourd said, but couldn't give a “final date of when that is going to happen.”

Under an agreement brokered by former Gov. Edwin Edwards, Louisiana runs the prison and pays off the debt at \$3.4 million a year, but won't own it when the debt is paid off in 2020.

The Louisiana Correctional Facilities Corp., a state board appointed by the governor, is close to renegotiating those terms and taking ownership of the prison, which has a checkered history beyond its construction.

When it was a juvenile prison, it garnered a national reputation as a poorly run prison where youth offenders were mistreated and violence was common.

Williams said he has received a \$600,000 grant from the National Rural Funders Collaborative to help in Steve Hoyle's conversion. However, that money can't be applied to the initiative until the state owns the center.

“What this ‘Success Center’ is supposed to do is help drop-outs and those in risk of dropping out to find jobs and increase skill levels,” Williams said. “We eventually want this to become a regional education center.”

A report submitted to the Louisiana Board of Regents by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems in June 2006 said a plan to convert Steve Hoyle into a community college would take 10 years. Concordia LLC, a design firm hired by the Louisiana Delta Coalition for Education and Economic Development, reported in its plan the project could cost more than \$48 million.

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