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## **Plan envisions Tallulah without prison Proposal to turn jail into school wins grant**

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TALLULAH In another day and time, this delta town ran on the whistle of the Chicago Mill Co.

Residents for miles around could tell by the length and pitch of the blast whether it was 10 till 7, or straight up 7 o'clock. It would blow again at noon and 1 p.m. Then the five o'clock whistle told workers — whether at the mill, in the stores or on the farms beyond — that quitting time had arrived.

The rusty loft that once was the mill's bustling epicenter is symbolic enough to stand as an icon of Tallulah's demise the past quarter-century. But Moses Williams says a better symbol of this town's struggle is the state prison that stands on what once was Tallulah's most prosperous property.

For years, Williams has led the fight to turn the prison, known by most from its former incarnation as Swanson Correctional Center, into a campus for a community support-education facility with an audacious goal: To eradicate poverty from the delta.

And Williams, sometimes dismissed by locals as sort of a pied piper of rural rescue, recently acquired a significant ally. A philanthropic group called the National Rural Funders Collaborative, based in Dallas, announced that it will provide major funding to aid Williams' Northeast Louisiana Delta Community Development Corp. Over the next two years, NRFC has committed \$300,000 to \$600,000 to the task.

"We considered about 50 initiatives," said NRFC executive director Jim Richardson. The Tallulah project is one of five that the NRFC chose to fund. "We believe this can make a significant difference in the ways of life of those three parishes."

The three parishes are Madison, East Carroll and Tensas — the contiguous river parishes that always appear at the bottom of almost any list of statewide statistics, including personal income, health care, mortality, unemployment and education.

It's a hopelessness that has existed since the mill closed, one that is responsible for Madison's sad ranking in another statistic: It has suffered the largest percentage drop in population in northeastern Louisiana since 2000.

Last year, the Louisiana Board of Regents commissioned a study of unmet educational needs in the river parishes. Its findings were predictable: The schools have very large classes, teachers without certification and high turnover, a lack of services that fit the needs of at-risk students and, as a result, a high school dropout rate of almost 33 percent.

While the study noted that no amount of grant money or government funding could make a difference in the delta without certified teachers in the schools, the rest of its conclusions were far from obvious.

It advocated an educational facility, not of conventional means but one geared toward adult literacy and designed to remove obstacles such as child care and transportation. It determined that no meaningful business could be attracted to the region until it offered a viable work force and that traditional education would not suffice.

It advocated a plan Williams had been pushing for years — to turn Tallulah's state prison, the Steve Hoyle Rehabilitation Center, into a "Success Center" that not only would educate the illiterate and unemployable but would provide a link between training and economic development.

Buoyed by the study, Williams invested in an expensive and impressive computer-generated proposal that won the approval of Jim Richardson's NRFC.

But grant approval aside, Williams' plan is far from a shoo-in. It's hard even to gauge Williams' appreciation in the community for which he surrendered a viable law practice.

That's because the creation of Williams' "Success Center" would require the closing of Madison's largest employer, the prison.

Warden Robert Rachal said the Hoyle Detention Center employs 159 workers who come from a 30- to 40-mile radius. Payroll and benefits add up to \$5 million annually.

Job opportunities on farms and plantations died out as technology replaced manual labor, and those in the delta had few options until an unsightly but welcomed economy began to blossom in the 1980s: prisons.

"Basically, the prison system has replaced the plantation system," Williams said. "Prisons provide a lot of low-paying jobs. When jobs are scarce, that's pretty good. But you may have to work two jobs to provide for your family."

The prison, in its current conformation, also serves a worthwhile means. Infamous as a youth detention center, the facility became the state's only prison with a full-time substance-abuse treatment center three years ago.

Its 260 beds stay at full capacity, 98 percent of which are involved in the voluntary treatment program, Rachal said. The 12-month program, primarily targeting DUI offenders, appears to be effective in reducing recidivism. Rachal's unofficial record

keeping has determined that only 4 percent of those who completed the program were repeat offenders, compared to about 13 percent of those who did not enter and finish the process.

"One of the successes is that we have so many wanting treatment," Rachal said. "I've had relatives of inmates at other prisons write to me to ask how they can get them in this program."

But the prison is hard-pressed against one of Tallulah's poorest neighborhoods, and only a block away from its public middle school. In the days of the Chicago Mill Co., the neighborhood thrived.

"People in prison are poor," Williams said. "They're from broken homes, they're dropouts and usually they are minorities, at least around here.

"If prisons are our economy, what you're saying is that to be successful, you need more poor, more people from broken homes, more crime. How can you be pushing that and say you want better communities?"

Williams argues that the prison's omnipresence has unintentional subconscious effects on those who live in the neighborhood. "It's a mentality," he said. "People see a kid do something wrong and say, 'One day, he'll be in prison.'

"If it was a school, they would say, 'He needs to be in school.' "

Williams has a grand plan for the facility. He says it was built as a school for delinquent juveniles and could be renovated to look like a community-college campus with little effort or expense.

State Secretary of Public Safety and Corrections Richard Stalder has said that the buildings would have to be razed for a school to be built. His assistant, Melissa Callahan, said Saturday the state Bond Commission has authorized the DOC to sell bonds, and the state has an agreement to buy the prison from private ownership.

Once the sale is complete, the prison's fate and the fate of the Delta Commission's grants is in the hands of the Legislature, which failed to pass a proposal by Sen. Charles Jones, D-Monroe, in 2004 to create Williams' school.

The Department of Corrections disputes Williams' contention that the campus would easily convert to a school is inaccurate. Rachal said only one building of the 12 on campus is designed as a classroom. The rest are housing units made of metal.

Despite the goodwill generated in 2004 by Gov. Kathleen Blanco's "Summit on Poverty" held in Monroe, little new money has been dedicated to educating the delta's poor. And Tallulah has a Vo-Tech school, a satellite campus of Louisiana Technical College.

"If the state puts money in Madison Parish for higher education, it has to go through LTC," campus dean Terry Murphy said.

Williams politely argues that Vo-Tech schools, as the education study concluded, are not the answer.

"The problems are so deep, you can't solve them the regular way," he said. "The study shows that. Some people don't want change, and it's justified by saying, 'These people can't be educated.'"