

Lea County Detention Facility

Local, federal inmates will have new quarters about the middle of May

MICHELLE A. FOX
NEWS-SUN

Warden Jann Gartman has walked through the construction site of the new Lea County Detention Facility at least once a week since the project began in November 2003.

These days, when she does her walk-throughs, there is always something she has never seen before. On Feb. 2, it was the kitchen equipment.

"Isn't all this stainless steel cool?" Gartman asked as she admired the industrial cooking gear still in most of its packing. "This wasn't here yesterday."

As the project nears completion, it is becoming easier every day to see that this building will indeed be a jail.

In the female housing units — the space closest to being completed — the cells have doors, beds and toilets. According to officials from White Construction, the female unit as well as the other units in section A are 95 percent completed.

The guards' control stations have the cabinets for the security equipment installed along with the security glass.

"You can finally start to see what all of this is going to look like," Gartman said.

One major difference between the current facility and the new, 432-bed jail is the presence of natural light.

"This is the first time the inmates will get to see daylight from their cells," said Paddy Downey, chief detention officer.

"We hope that will affect their behavior and sleep patterns."

Even with all the progress being made, the \$21 million facility was not scheduled to be open to begin training until this month — a long departure from the county being able to have inmates in the cells by the beginning of January. The delays have been attributed to weather and manpower.

"The project is going smoothly, although not as quickly as we would like," said Bob Sherman of White Construction. "The work has been slowed due to bad weather, lack of supplies and manpower."

According to Summers, when ground on the new jail was broken, it was the only major construction project in the county. That has changed and taken workers away from the jail project.

Gartman hopes to be able to begin training as soon as sections are completed to make up for the time delays. That may not be able to occur since there could be some legalities that will not allow training in the building to start until it is 100 percent completed.

When the county decided in 2003 to build a new jail instead of renovating the current facility, federal money played a part in the decision.

In an agreement with the U.S.



Marshal's Office, Lea County will be reimbursed \$65.50 a day per federal inmate. The Marshal's Office has promised the county to use at least 90 of the 100 beds being earmarked for federal inmates. The county is also getting \$500,000 from the Commerce, Justice, State and the Judiciary Appropriation bills for juvenile education.

According to Gartman, the Marshal's Office is ready to send inmates as soon as the jail is ready to house them. For now, however, it is just a waiting game until the jail is ready for inhabitants.

Safety was also a reason for a new facility. In the current county jail, there are several areas with blind corners that guards cannot see around. In the new facility, each unit will have a central guard station. The guard will have a complete view of every cell, along with control of each individual cell's electricity and other utilities.

"Each station can see all the way down the hallway as well as every cell door in the corridor," Gartman said.

Gartman estimates that after the May 4 completion of the building, inmates can start living in the new facility within two weeks.



Left, natural light can be seen shining in from the right side of this completed prison cell block within the 432-bed new Lea County Detention Facility in Lovington.

Below, during construction natural light can be seen in the recreation area inside the new 432-bed Lea County Detention Facility.

KIMBERLY RYAN/NEWS-SUN



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