

Prison deal to draw 311 jobs Plans under way to occupy 1,500-bed dormant facility

BY HARRY FRANKLIN

State Editor

A plan to open a dormant private prison in Stewart County, employing more than 311 people to house federal detainees, appears close to fruition as final negotiations continue on a contract already signed by county officials.

More than seven years after Corrections Corporation of America announced plans to build the \$45 million private prison near Lumpkin, Ga., the Nashville, Tenn.-based company is negotiating with a federal agency a contract bringing jobs badly needed in one of southwest Georgia's poorest communities.

CCA officials met Tuesday with Stewart County Commissioners in Lumpkin to discuss plans to occupy the 1,500-bed prison. Commission Clerk Diane Babb said the county signed a proposed intergovernmental agreement that includes CCA and a federal agency that proposes to house detainees facing deportation to their own countries.

Louise Gilchrist, the company's vice president for marketing and communications, said Thursday that a contract has not been signed and that negotiation with a federal agency are still under way. She said company officials hope an agreement can be completed

soon so the empty prison can be occupied before the end of this year.

"We finished the last construction in 2004," she said. "If and when we have a negotiated agreement, we will have local people on the ground."

"We have worked on this thing for several years," said Georgia Sen. George Hooks, D-Americus. "We have been back and forth with the feds. It was in the state's hands. I worked to put it there. This will be a wonderful thing, not only for Stewart County but for the entire region. It will provide private-paying jobs in cooperation with the state and federal governments. It's a great facility."

The Lower Chattahoochee Regional Development Center in Columbus is preparing a pre-application for a \$500,000 Employment Incentives Grant for the prison project, said RDC Executive Director Patti Cullen. The funds would be used for a well and water tank.

"It's wonderful if we have that many jobs coming to Stewart County," Cullen said.

Wanted: New warden

Curtis Ranum, hired as warden of the empty prison a year ago, said Thursday that he is

retiring Saturday after serving for the first time as warden of a prison that never housed an inmate. He also is meeting at

9 a.m. today with Georgia Department of Labor officials in Columbus to work out recruitment plans to fill the prison jobs, he said.

CCA announced plans in April 1999 to build and operate a private, medium-security prison on a rural tract near Lumpkin. The project was to create 400-450 jobs and have an annual payroll of \$6 million, with \$2 million-\$2.5 million in annual expenditures in a county that needed jobs and revenue badly. The plan was to contract with the state of Georgia to house state prisoners.

The company bought 100 acres in August 1999, paying Stewart County \$100,000 for the land adjoining Stewart County Correctional Institute off Stewart County Road 79. It contracted with Ray Bell Construction Co. Brentwood, Tenn., to build it and construction began in January 2000.

The company announced in March 2000 that construction was being delayed while CCA negotiated with the state to fill 500 prison beds at two other private prisons it operates in the state.

In February 2001, the Georgia Department of Corrections announced it might consider buying the vacant prison, with the need for additional beds to house a growing population of inmates. That didn't happen.

In July 2001, CCA, the nation's largest private prison operator, confirmed it was talking to Alabama officials about possibly housing some of that state's inmates.

In April 2003, the Georgia Legislature approved \$500,000 in up-front money to buy, lease or privatize the prison near Lumpkin.

In September 2003, the company announced it would complete construction of the prison, with about \$35 million already invested and the facility about 70 percent complete. Work resumed in October.

In June 2004, the company announced the prison east of Lumpkin should be ready to occupy by early August, but it still did not have an occupant. Company officials had talked with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, U.S. Marshal's Service and federal immigration officials about using the facility.