

At the Crossroads, a decade later in Shelby

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SHELBY – Some Toole County residents worried the private prison being proposed by community leaders in 1998 might turn Shelby into a prison town with higher crime rates and more families on welfare.

It's now 10 years after the Sept. 1, 1999, opening of the \$32 million Crossroads Correctional Center on the west edge of Shelby.

Area residents seem fairly united in describing the private prison that oversees about 620 prisoners as a well-run operation and a vital component to a diverse economy.

For instance, figures tracked by local government officials show a slight decrease of families on welfare during the 10 years and no escapes from the prison, said longtime Mayor Larry Bonderud.

Meanwhile, Shelby has seen "a small, sustainable population growth of about 1 to 2 percent a year," he said, at a time when other Hi-Line towns are shrinking.

Toole County has an unemployment rate of just 3.7



Correctional officer Kevin Dassinger supervises inmate movement at the Crossroads Correctional Center near Shelby. In the decade since the private prison opened, it has become a vital component of that community's surprisingly diverse economy. (TRIBUNE PHOTOS/ RION SANDERS)

percent, the lowest jobless rate of counties in the Golden Triangle and the second lowest among Hi-Line counties. The unemployment rate in Daniels County is 3.5 percent.

The prison's 180 employees, as well as new federal border patrol officers, supplement the longtime agriculture and oil and gas industries.

Two of the most vocal earlier critics now support Crossroads.

"One of my biggest concerns was that private prisons could do anything they wanted, including mistreating inmates," said Patricia Hellinger, a Devon farmer and natural health commentator. "What I saw on a tour three years ago changed my mind. I found things were clean and professionally run, with a good library. If we had to have a prison, I'm glad it's one of the better ones and a real community asset."

Her group nearly blocked the Shelby prison in 1998 by getting a temporary court injunction that could have delayed the project past the state's construction deadline.

Hellinger now credits state regulators and Bonderud's influence for keeping the prison well run.

Another former critic, James V. Smith Jr., said his fears did not materialize.

"I didn't want to live in a prison town, with strange people walking the streets. I'm glad we didn't have any negative change in community character," said Smith who commutes between a Great Falls job as editor of Rural Montana Magazine and his Shelby home.

"I'm grateful our city and county governments, especially Mayor Bonderud, didn't stop building the community once the prison issue was decided. They went on looking for other industry and built a strong, diverse economy."

Community leaders pushed for a transloading facility where goods in storage containers can be transferred between trains and trucks. The city and county also got considerably

more Homeland Security border patrol officers the last few years.

"We're one of the safest counties anywhere," Bonderud said, noting some 230 correction officers, Border Patrol agents, local police and regional FBI and Montana Highway Patrol officers who work in the county with 5,100 residents.

One business supporter praised Crossroads' contributions.

"I think the prison has worked out really well," said Byron Kluth, president of First State Bank. "It's so well run and quiet you nearly forget it's here. There might be an occasional assault there that local police have to deal with, but they're few and far between."

The combined city-county police department estimates its officers spend 330 hours a year investigating charges and serving warrants at the prison, but Bonderud said that's easily covered by the \$530,000 in property taxes the prison pays annually.

"The private company, Corrections Corporations of America, is a good neighbor that chips in for community events, besides paying a lot of taxes," Kluth said. "I can't think of any down side, other than a shortage of modestly priced homes in Shelby spurred by the increase in employees at the prison and Border Patrol."

City officials are encouraging contractors to build subdivisions.

"It's a lot better to have plenty of jobs and a tight housing market than too few jobs and a surplus of housing," Kluth added.

About 180 employees work for the prison, which has an annual payroll of \$6.3 million, according to 2008 figures in a 10-year economic and social review done by city and county government. That's an average salary of about \$35,000, counting health insurance, 401-K plans and other benefits, Bonderud said.

"That's good pay for rural Montana," he said.

Such new, base-industry jobs created with money from outside the community have a great ripple impact in a small town, helping create and support other service sector jobs, Bonderud added.

Crossroads Warden Sam Law said wage averages can be misleading because of the variety and role of prison workers, who are paid based on responsibilities, education and experience. Corrections officers start at \$11 an hour and work their way up to \$15.50, he said.

Fifteen employees have worked at Crossroads since it opened a decade ago, including several correctional officers and some administrators.

About 60 percent of the employees live in Toole County, while nearly 20 percent commute from nearby Cut Bank and other parts of Glacier County and about 20 percent from Conrad and other Pondera County areas.

CCC averages utility payments of \$590,000 a year, Law said.

The prison also has contracted services with 40 other people in medical and building crafts fields, Bonderud said.

Marias Medical Center bills the prison about \$130,000 a year for prisoner care, both in the prison and, for emergency care and diagnostic tests, at the hospital, said Marias Medical CEO Mark Cross. That's on top of the medical care prison employees receive through their work-provided health insurance.

In addition, CCC reported paying \$160,000 in fees last year to the physician who serves the prison half-time and physician assistants who work there three-quarters time.

"The private prison's employees and inmates have helped us maintain a good volume of patients that in turn has allowed us to improve medical services for all residents," Cross said. "Crossroads Correctional Center has been a good business partner."

Shelby School Superintendent Matt Genger said the prison and its 180 employees "are a definite plus for the school district."

The prison's regular property tax payments allow the school board to keep school levy increases from going up too much to cover on-going energy and salary increases, he said.

And the children of employees from the prison, Border Patrol and other employers have helped bring greater cultural diversity to Shelby, Genger said.

Law, in turn, said he is one of several prison employees who appreciate the quality of education the smaller area schools provide their children.

The warden said about 25 inmates a year earns high school equivalency degrees at the prison, but most of the Montana prisoners already have high school degrees because of the state's high educational standards.

"Our staff has a wonderful relationship with the Montana Department of Corrections," Law said. "And the community support we get from Shelby and surrounding communities is just phenomenal."

For its part, Crossroads Correctional Center supports several community groups, including yearly donations to nine local high schools in support of safe graduation parties. It's also been a regular contributor to Hi-Line Women Against Breast Cancer. And its staff began delivering Christmas gifts to children from needy families in several towns.