

It's Official! \$9.2 million meth treatment center coming to Lewistown

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The top corrections official in Montana told a large and enthusiastic crowd at the Yogo Inn on Tuesday an 80-bed methamphetamine treatment center is coming to Lewistown.

The long awaited announcement from Montana Department of Corrections Director Bill Slaughter was greeted with loud applause. As Fergus County Port Authority Chairman John Hertel put it, the Port Authority ad Lewistown finally landed a big one.

Mike Thatcher, chief executive officer of the Butte-based firm that will build and operate the center, said the project will cost \$9.2 million and should be in operation by next spring. He said the center will require 44 full-time employees, will have a \$1.8 million payroll and purchases will be made largely in Lewistown.

Slaughter described the center as "on the leading edge, not just for Montana but for the entire country."

The DOC director praised Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D-Mont.) for having the courage to "think outside the box and support new ways of treating addicted people." Describing himself as a Schweitzer Republican, Slaughter praised the governor's concern for public safety.

Several speakers, including Slaughter and Thatcher, praised Rep. Jim Peterson (R-Buffalo), who introduced the legislation allowing the DOC to build a meth treatment center. Peterson also lead the battle to fund it and shepherded the authorization bill through the difficult legislative process.

"This is a pretty satisfying day for me," said Peterson. He reminded several in the audience that the road to Tuesday's announcement began almost three years ago at a Port Authority meeting. At that time, Lewistown was competing for an adult alcohol addiction treatment center that eventually went to Glendive.

So the Port Authority changed to a meth treatment center when it learned the DOC also was looking for a place to put such a center. Peterson pushed the bill through the Legislature not knowing for sure that it would come to Lewistown, Slaughter said.

It began as a 40-bed pilot project, Peterson said, but when problems with meth addiction grew in Montana, it became apparent a larger facility is needed. It grew to a 120-bed project with 80 beds for male addicts to be located in Lewistown and 40 beds for females in Boulder.

"This is the first facility of its kind in America," Peterson said. "We should be extremely proud of this. Judges testified in favor of it; law enforcement testified in favor of it."

However, it was not easy getting the proposal through the Legislature's Appropriations Committee, Peterson said. He said the first answer he got was "no." Eventually, the project was funded through the DOC's special needs budget, the Buffalo representative said.

"It was my honor to help with the projects and I believe it ended up like it is because of you-- because of the support Lewistown gave it. You were solidly behind the project. It is unusual for a community to welcome a project like this," Peterson said.

Slaughter said the state no longer is building prison beds. More and more it is building centers to treat individuals who can be returned to society as productive citizens. He said two alcohol addiction centers in the state, at Warm Springs and Glendive, have an 86 percent success rate.

"This is a fresh approach to corrections in Montana," said Slaughter. We warned, however, there is no silver bullet for meth treatment. He said he hopes it saves the taxpayers' money, "but even more importantly we hope it will save lives."

Community, Counseling, and Correctional Services, Inc., the Butte firm that will build and operate the center, has a great track record with the DOC, Slaughter said. The firm operates several other facilities around the state for the DOC.

He noted the Lewistown center will treat addicts for nine months and then they will go to pre-release centers elsewhere for six months. This is an alternative to spending three or more years in prison. The legislation allows judges to sentence addicts directly to the Lewistown center, Slaughter said.

"We owe a great debt to this community. It welcomed us with open arms. It's been an amazing thing to see," Slaughter said.

That was a theme running through all of the speeches at the announcement ceremony Tuesday. Speakers were amazed at the support given the project

from the beginning. In other communities, that has not been the case for most correctional facilities.