

Governor praises new meth center as an answer to a corrections problem

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Lewistown residents see the new Nexus methamphetamine treatment center as contributing to economic development while Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D-Mont.) sees it as an answer to a corrections problem.

That's what the governor told a crowd of more than 100 who attended a grand opening ceremony Wednesday morning at the center, located at Lewistown Municipal Airport.

Schweitzer said that when he took over as governor two years ago, Montana's corrections population was growing at a faster rate than any other state.

"I asked why this was happening and I found we were just warehousing people," said Schweitzer. He said he discovered that people were going into the system, staying a while, being let out and then returning to the system.

"We hadn't treated the underlying cause. Meth is one of the most addictive drugs there is, worse than anything else," he said. "We knew it would take more money to reform the system but if we don't spend it, we will eventually have more people in the Big House than we have out of the Big House."

Schweitzer headlined a group of speakers that included Sen. Jim Peterson (R-Butte); Lewistown City Manager Kevin Myhre; Airport Board Chairman Darryl McKenzie; Kathie A. Bailey, executive director of Snowy Mountain Development Corp.; and others. Mike Thatcher, chief executive officer of Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., acted as master of ceremonies.

CCCS is the Butte-based firm that built the \$10 million center and is operating it for the Montana Department of Corrections.

The governor set the theme for the ceremony by thanking the people of Lewistown for supporting the construction of a meth treatment center here and thanking Montanans for allowing the state "to be on the cutting edge of corrections policy."

He even praised the Legislature, members of which he had criticized harshly when the Legislature was in session. He said they "did well in 90 and 5 days." He was referring to the fact the Legislature reconvened for a five-day special session to approve the state budget and other bills.

"Montana is on the move," said Schweitzer. "And you are feeling it here in Lewistown as much as anywhere else. When I get back to Helena I am going to tell them you filled the gym for this event."

The speeches, followed by a ribbon-cutting ceremony, were held in the new facility's gymnasium.

Two-time convicted meth offenders being held in other areas of the state's penal system are to begin arriving here on Friday. Only those approved by a Lewistown screening committee will be allowed to come.

"We have said to Montanans and to the people all over America we are willing to try something new – we are willing to stake out a new course," said the governor.

Thatcher, in remarks following the governor's, said this was the third grand opening of a community corrections center he has attended since Schweitzer became governor "and this speaks volumes about (the governor's) commitment to corrections programs."

In introducing Peterson, Thatcher said "Jim was a stalwart in the whole process. He was critical to getting this project approved. The notable thing about it was that it had bipartisan support. Everyone embraced the idea that we need to do treatment (of meth offenders)."

Peterson, as a member of the House in the previous Legislature, carried the bill that allowed this type of meth treatment in Montana. Several who spoke Wednesday credited Peterson's work to pass that bill as paving the way for the Lewistown meth treatment center.

"A little over four years ago, this process began. I recall a lot of meetings and a lot of conversations and a lot of phone calls. It required a change in the law," said Peterson. "And while I carried the bill that changed the law it was all of you who made this center possible with your trips to Helena, your letters and petitions and your other efforts."

"When we started this in 2003 and 2004, more than 400 people a year were being sentenced into Montana's criminal corrections system for drugs and a high percentage of those were meth addicts," Peterson said.

The Buffalo Republican said the 80-bed Lewistown center is the first treatment center of its kind in the United States. He said this center is for men only. A similar facility for women has been constructed at Boulder.

"I hope you are proud of it. It is too bad that we have to have it, but we do need it," said Peterson. "They (the patients) will finally get the treatment they need. They will be in here nine months."

Peterson and others noted that not every community in Montana has welcomed correctional facilities. They continually praised Lewistown for the support it gave in bringing the meth center here.

John Hertel, chairman of the Fergus County Port Authority, said his organization was instrumental in bringing the meth center to Lewistown. He said Port Authority board members initially wanted it because of the jobs it would bring and the other economic benefits.

"But when it got going and took off, they also became involved in wanting to provide a center that would help meth addicts," said Hertel.

"On behalf of the Port Authority, I just want to say this is truly a grand day, a grand day for the state, for Lewistown, for Fergus County and for all of you. We've worked for this for a long time. I am absolutely elated by it," Hertel said.

Thatcher read letters supporting the center from Sens. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) and Jon Tester (D-Mont.), and a representative of Rep. Denny Rehberg (R-Mont.) read a letter from him.

Thatcher also handed out awards to several individuals including Tim Robertson, CEO of Century Co., the prime contractor, and Bret Birdwell of Birdwell Builders, subcontractor.

Thatcher said the contractors had done a "phenomenal" job but apologized that the landscaping around the building was not completed.

"The landscaping isn't done yet," Thatcher said, "because it has been raining in Lewistown for several days."