

Pride in jail almost palpable

Posted: Thursday, February 18, 2010 2:00 pm | Updated: 11:23 am, Wed Feb 24, 2010.

By BETSY FRIEDRICH Hub Staff Writer | 0 comments

KEARNEY — The bare white walls and empty cellblocks of Buffalo County's new jail were crowded with curious people Wednesday as residents got their first look at the facility.

More than 200 people attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony conducted by the Buffalo County Board of Supervisors. The ceremony was followed by tours of the \$11.9 million building.

"We're happy to have you here. We want you to have an opportunity to see your jail. I've told people on many occasions that this is your jail," Sheriff Neil Miller said.

"A wise man once told me, 'There are no votes in the jail, so you're on your own if you're going to do something about one.' It's great to see today that's not necessarily true. We have a community that supported us because we showed them there was a need, and I feel very fortunate to be part of a community that has done that for us," he said.

Construction of the jail was funded by a \$24.5 million bond issue that voters approved in an April 2008 election.

The bonds will also fund construction of a courts complex with new courtrooms and offices west of the jail. When the inmates are moved into the new jail, the old jail will be demolished to make room for the new courts complex.

Together, the buildings will be known as the Buffalo County Justice Center.

The sheriff's office and supervisors said a new jail was needed because the old jail was overcrowded and unsafe.

"This is quite a milestone for Buffalo County. It's a huge project, and we're about half done now. We've got more to go, but the jail is a huge step in the right direction for us," Board Chairman Dick Pierce said. "We think it's a top-notch facility, state of the art, and I think you'll be impressed."

"This is a great day, and we've been working toward it for quite a long time," Supervisor Hoss Dannehl said. "I'm extremely proud of this facility — not only the jail, but the other phases we have planned."

After the ribbon cutting, corrections officers and deputies guided tour groups through the jail.

"This is great. We've had a lot of people out here, and it's unbelievable the turnout we've had. I just love mingling with the people, so it's been a lot of fun," Corrections Officer Rosario Perez said.

She said officers are looking forward to working in the new facility.

"I think the thing we're most looking forward to is we'll be able to classify all our people where they need to be. Right now, we're so crowded that we have too many inmates in one area. In here, it's going to be more separated," she said.

"It won't be as stressful. We'll be able to see them, and it will be more controllable. We won't have so many people in each room, and we'll be able to just go in there without worrying about, 'Is someone underneath the stairs or about to do something?' It will be less chaos."

Monte Standage of Gibbon was on one of the tours Wednesday. He was a member of the Justice Center Advisory Committee that worked to educate people about the bond issue before the election.

"It's certainly very nice, state of the art, obviously. I suppose I was surprised by the technology and the sophistication of the safety features," he said.

C.L. Sell of Gibbon was also on the advisory committee.

"It turned out to be everything I thought it would be," he said. "I think they did a really thorough job of using the space and utilizing the taxpayers' dollars. I'm sure it's a much safer facility than what they had in the past."

"It's really nice, just awesome," said Cheryl Weides of Kearney. "It's just so nice and clean right now. It's kind of hard to imagine the prisoners living in here, but it's very interesting."

"It's a very nice facility, definitely. It looks like it will be more secure," said Jan Anderson of Kearney.

Charlie Pickens of Kearney, who was also on the advisory committee, said he was pleased with the high turnout Wednesday. "It's been fabulous. You can tell the community is very interested in this," he said.

The tours included a look inside the county's new Emergency Operations Center in the basement of the jail. The center will serve as a base of operations during major disasters. It houses the county's backup 911 system, amateur radios and backup power sources.

The center was partially funded by a \$200,000 Emergency Management Program Grant from the state. Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy spoke at the ribbon cutting and said he was excited about the new center.

"I'm proud the state of Nebraska, using some of our Department of Homeland Security Grants, contributed about \$200,000 to help install some of the new equipment. Since Sept. 11, all the states were criticized because we didn't have inter-operable radio centers for our first responders to be able to coordinate their efforts.

"Buffalo County and Sheriff Miller have been on the leading edge of what we have had the ability to create in Nebraska. We are very happy to be a small piece of that," Sheehy said.

Miller finished his remarks by thanking his staff, many of whom were not present because they were working.

"They have helped with every bit of this process, and we could not have done this without them. The thing that kept us going was we were doing this for them, so thank you to all of them."