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## Ready for Service

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By BETSY FRIEDRICH Hub Staff Writer |

KEARNEY — The bare white walls and empty cellblocks of Buffalo County's new jail will soon be filled with orange-clad inmates.

Sheriff Neil Miller said the county's inmates were to be moved into the \$11.9 million building sometime in March, but progress has been stalled because of last-minute construction details.

Miller declined to name the exact date the prisoners will be moved, but said he expects to have them in the new facility by early April.

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.

"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 ... that's not necessarily true," Miller said at the grand opening of the facility in February.

"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.

"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 at the ceremony. "We think it's a top-notch facility, state of the art."

Corrections officers say they're also excited about the new jail.

Officer Rosario Perez said she and her co-workers 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."

The construction project also included 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 interoperable 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.

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#### **Nearly six years of planning, building:**

—May 18, 2004 – Buffalo County Board of Supervisors signs contract with Goldberg, Sullivan and McCreery Architects of St. Joseph, Mo., to create a courthouse master plan that assessed future needs

—August 2005 – Supervisors sign contract with Beckenhauer Construction of Norfolk for additions to the west entrance of the courthouse

—March 11, 2008 – Buffalo County voters approve \$24.5 million bond issue to build new jail and courts

—June 10, 2008 – Supervisors sign contract with Beckenhauer for Justice Center project

—July 29, 2008 – First bids awarded for jail construction

—Aug. 12, 2008 – Jail groundbreaking

—Oct. 28, 2008 – Bonds sold for Justice Center project

—Dec. 9, 2008 – Supervisors establish guaranteed maximum price for jail at \$12.1 million

—Feb. 12, 2010 – Construction finished on new Buffalo County Jail

—Feb. 17, 2010 – Ribbon cutting for completed jail

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