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## **Under Construction, Over Capacity**



Buffalo County Detention Center is experiencing record numbers of inmates. There are so many that it's become impossible to house them all. This makes finishing construction on the new justice center a top priority.

The construction started in August and continues to be on schedule. If things progress as planned officials hope to be finished in about two years.

There's no sound of drills, hammers or heavy machinery at this construction site, but don't let that fool you. "We are on schedule, a very tight schedule, to meet the needs of the county," explained Project Superintendent Carl Gibbs of Beckenhauer Construction.

Keeping construction of the Buffalo County Justice Center on time is a matter of thousands of dollars. "We have so many prisoners right now that we're really hoping to keep this project on track. Every day we get behind it costs us more money," said Buffalo County Sheriff Neil Miller.

Money that's being paid to other counties to house inmates Buffalo County's current 85-bed prison doesn't have space for. "We have record numbers right now. We have never seen this number of inmates in this facility," said Miller.

With an absolute maximum capacity of 100 prisoners, last weekend's 115 put a huge strain on taxpayer's pockets. "It gets very expensive. For the month of December Buffalo County wrote Dawson County a check for \$35,000," Miller said.

In today's economy every dollar counts. In fact, this financial trouble may be the reason the daily number of inmates has doubled in the last fifteen years. Miller explained, "When the economy gets like it is right now I think that's going to have an impact. More thefts and some of the property crimes that take place."

Whether or not crime will drop once the Dow rises is yet to be seen. In the meantime, the people behind this project are trying to stay above the influence of the economy. "Beautifully, we're under budget and that's the important thing in today's marketplace," said Gibbs.

It's a two-phase project. Gibbs hopes the first will be ready for inmates to move in this November and the entire project will be done in two years.

Reporter's Notes by Laurie Dutcher:

The cost of housing an inmate in a different jail can really add up. "It gets rather expensive when you look at \$45 a day per inmate. Plus the cost of medical and transportation. So, those numbers get big really quickly," said Miller.

Miller says the record numbers are a product of two different factors. "One is more people coming in, about 30% more inmates being booked than 1994, and our average length of stay."

"Our average length of stay has doubled since 1994. That's a big increase. We went from an average of about 7 days in the county jail in 1994, this year 14.5 was the average," said Miller.

This has helped drive the prison population up. "Our daily population in 1994 was 40 inmates a day. Last year's average was right around 92 inmates per day. We've over doubled in the last 15 years," explained Miller.

"Kearney and Buffalo County are growing. We've experienced some really good growth, but with that you also get increased problems," Miller said.

Miller explains the two-phase build. "We're going to build the majority of the cells in the first phase. Move out of the old jail into the new jail. Then we'll demolish the old jail and add on, which adds another 40 cells."

That will bring the total beds to 205 and add five new courtrooms.

Gibbs is waiting for the arrival of already built jail cells. "The high point of next month is getting the jail cells. They're due March 25th. If everything goes well, seven days later they'll be in place. Then we'll start putting a roof on this place. Everything will kind of go after that," he said.