

A complex originally constructed several years ago to house probationers will open as a transitional center to help inmates released from prison ease back into society.

The center will open thanks to \$2.6 million provided by the 2008 Legislature, according to state Rep. DuBose Porter. Opening of the center will bring 34 jobs, including correctional officers, administrative and personnel positions. The center will carry a \$1 million annual budget, including salaries and upkeep of facilities.

"This will give some of them the opportunity to go to work rather than being dumped on the street," said state Rep. DuBose Porter. "Also, we have a lot of people in Laurens County who work with the Department of Corrections in neighboring counties. This will allow many of them to work closer to home. With today's gas prices, this is a great opportunity."

The transitional center, located on Lovett Farm Road off U.S. 80 East outside East Dublin, will be operated under the DOC and will house 100 to 150 lower risk inmates as they transition their way back into society after a long prison stay. Lower risk includes those serving time for property crimes or drug offenses. No sex offenders or high risk inmates will be housed at the center, according to the DOC.

According to assistant commissioner Brian Owens, the first 30 days of a resident's stay will be spent learning the rules while performing duties around the center before entering the work release program. Once a resident begins his job, he will work during the day and return to the center at night.

Of the resident's pay, \$90 per week will be used to pay for room and board, all of which goes back to the general treasury. The residents are allowed \$60-\$70 a week to purchase incidentals, and the rest is banked until the inmate is released.

A resident's pay also will be used to cover any restitution, child support and other court-related fees.

Businesses will be afforded a \$2,600 tax credit for employing the center residents.

Residents of the center will pay taxes and wear civilian clothes in their jobs. They will be under light supervision, with spot checks at their places of employment and their pay sent directly to the center.

DOC statistics show inmates released to a transitional center, likened to a halfway house, are up to a third more likely to succeed in maintaining a crime-free life.

"We believe as we've opened if we know who's coming back, where they're going, you are a safer public than giving someone a bus ticket and \$25 in their pocket," Owens said. "These guys are coming home one way or another. I just believe this is the safer way."

An inmate is referred to a transitional center by either the staff at the prison or the State Board of Pardons and Paroles. Factors which influence the decision to send an inmate to a transitional center include criminal history and behavior while in prison.

Since its construction, the building has never been occupied, but has had several possible uses. The 30,000-square-foot complex was originally constructed as a diversion center to offer an alternative to sending those who are not hardened criminals — but have a debt to pay — to prison. A change in focus and leadership at the DOC diverted the original plan.

Officials also considered the site for a possible training center for criminal justice classes and create a law enforcement/ fire fighter training center for the region.

Other funds approved for area projects during the session include three local assistant grants. Laurens County Rural Fire received \$8,000 for the purchase of Polaris Range to help in fire fighting. The Laurens County Sheriff's Office garnered \$15,000 for a rescue phone system and \$8,000 for safety equipment. Johnson County received \$2,500 for the 4-H program and \$10,000 for recreation programs.