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## New use, new vision, new goal, new name

Former Paris Work Camp to be adult educational center by September 2009

By GARY HENRY  
Staff Writer

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Edgar County's business, educational and community leaders looked into the future Wednesday night.

The presentation at Sycamore Hills Country Club discussed initial plans for converting the former Ed Jenison Work Camp into an educational center to fill many community needs.

"We have a goal that by September 2009 somebody's going to be educated out there," said Paris mayor Craig Smith.

He was one of several speakers who discussed a vision that converts the abandoned prison into an educational and cultural center that will not only improve the quality of life for Edgar County citizens but also spur economic development.

The 20-acre site, with three buildings, was transferred from the state to the City of Paris in July through a quitclaim deed stipulating the property must be used for a public purpose.

"There is no greater public purpose in our minds than education," said Smith.



Bill Minnis, President and CEO of the Citizens National Bank, said one of the first tasks is to change how people think about the property.

"It's a prison if we let it be a prison," said Minnis. "It can look like anything we want it to."

A change already under way is an effort to break old habits through the use of a new name. During the course of the meeting, the site was referred to as the Ed-Plex – a term coined by Ned Jenison that continues the historical reference to his father, Ed Jenison, while recognizing the new purpose of creating a complex of educational facilities.

Minnis, a former professor at Eastern Illinois University, explained Ed-Plex will not be a school but rather a learning center where adults can take classes to improve their skills to secure better jobs, professional people can obtain their required continuing education credits via fiber optic links, people wanting to start a business can seek advice from an entrepreneurial center and noncredit enrichment classes in art, music, fitness and other areas will improve the quality of life.

According to Minnis, distance, especially with rising fuel prices, is the barrier that stymies rural Americans. It requires time and money to travel 30 miles or more to take a college level class.

"It is far enough to cause people not to do it," said Minnis, adding the Ed-Plex will remove that barrier.

Something else that will need changed is an attitude that learning stops with high school graduation. Areas residents must embrace the opportunity for continued learning for the project to succeed.

"An instructor in a classroom, doesn't work if people aren't in the classroom," said Minnis.

Speaker Bruce Smith, an executive with Cargill, revisited the quality of life issue. He noted a lack of desirable amenities in rural communities is a hindrance in hiring professionals.

He additionally stated that local education does not produce job candidates with the basic business, communication and technical skills that Cargill wants.

"We have a lot of concern about the existing resources to sustain business in this community," said Smith, noting during the last year Cargill has offered in-house training for verbal, writing, and listening skills as well as conflict management and database use. "We have a lot of turnover."

Smith endorsed the Ed-Plex concept for improving the quality of employees, supporting the needs of business and making the community a more desirable place to live.

"We have an opportunity to allow this community to grow," said Smith



REP. ROGER EDDY, foreground, and Sen. Dale Righter, background, reviewed the political maneuvering that was necessary to return the former prison back into public use under the auspices of the City of Paris. (Beacon-News Photo/Gary Henry)



His statements were echoed by Kirk Welter, plant manager at NAL.

"We've had to import a lot of talent," said Welter. "That's bad news for the community because it should be people in the community who get those jobs. It's bad news for the business because after we get them trained those people move on to other places. We'd like to get that talent from our community."

Welter stressed the old job preparation paths are no longer valid. He noted in his father's day people prepared through an apprenticeship, and when he entered the work force the common approach was to put people into easy jobs and let them grow.

"In the competitive environment of today, business can't allow any weak link," Welter said.

He is excited about Ed-Plex's potential for providing technical training.

"If industry knows they have ready access to technically trained people, it will attract more businesses to locate here," said Welter.

Representatives of MartinRiley Architects-Engineers from Fort Wayne, Ind., delivered a PowerPoint presentation showing how the current buildings can be expanded with classroom additions, including a separate auditorium for performing arts and a variety of athletic fields incorporated into the site.

Jack E. Daniel said the ideas were generated by the firm's staff based on the company's past experience in developing similar properties in other locations and were only for purposes of discussion. He stressed the final version can only be achieved by the community working together to reach a consensus.

"Whatever we do here can serve more than Paris," said Daniel. "I think that's an important note."

Mayor Smith also mentioned the need for a broad commitment in his remarks. He defined community as Edgar County, rather than Paris, in discussing his vision for Ed-Plex.

The mayor expressed a goal of eventually having a new high school at the site. He told the crowd there is definitive evidence linking quality public school systems with successful economic development.

"If we can provide companies with a smarter work force, they will come," he said.

The community, Mayor Smith said, must prepare for a future when all of the baby-boomers are out of the work force. He said projections call for women to be a stable part of a much more diverse work force in 2050 and the educational model must adapt to the changing times.

"Schools will go 24-7," the mayor predicted. "Your schools are not going to look like they do now."

It is too early in the process to assign firm costs to such an ambitious project, especially when many critical decisions are yet to be made. Grants writer Fredi Beth Schmutte has been retained to seek funding for the initial phase of getting the adult education center under way.

Mayor Smith said the offices of Senators Dick Durbin and Barack Obama and Rep. Tim Johnson are interested in the idea and will work to secure any federal money that is available.

Rep. Roger Eddy (R-Hutsonville) and Sen. Dale Righter (R-Mattoon) were instrumental in getting the state's asking price of \$1.3 million down to a quitclaim and \$1. Both men were present at the meeting and said they will continue to work for the project in the legislature.

Minnis is confident funding will follow the idea

"Funding is as visionary as the buildings and the people," said Minnis. "If we let money be a barrier, that barrier is there forever. I like to think in big dollars. People like to put money into bigger visions rather than small plans."

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