

## Lawrence County to become home of new maximum security prison

*BY KURT ERICKSON, The Southern Springfield Bureau*

SPRINGFIELD -- In a surprise move, the small Lawrence County town of Sumner is poised to become home to the state's newest maximum-security prison.

The unannounced transition of the Lawrence Correctional Center from a medium-security facility to one holding the state's most violent and dangerous offenders, comes as the Illinois Department of Corrections scrambles to find homes for inmates who currently reside at the state's soon-to-close maximum-security lock-up in Pontiac.

The news came as a surprise to Sumner Mayor Betty Brian, who works at a bank two miles east of the prison.

"I had not heard that. I don't know what to tell you," Brian said Tuesday.

State Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, blasted prison officials for failing to inform local officials of the change.

"This is the most unorganized reorganization I've ever witnessed," Eddy said.

The apparently evolving plan for Pontiac is to close the 137-year-old facility on Dec. 31 and open about half of the mostly unused lock-up in Thomson, located north of the Quad-Cities.

Corrections officials have said closing Pontiac will save \$4 million, but now are saying the figure could be higher because original estimates had Pontiac staying open through February.

In the interim, the agency is shuffling prisoners around the state.

On Tuesday, 50 inmates from Lawrence were bused to the prison in Pinckneyville to make room for Pontiac prisoners.

The department plans to transfer another 100 inmates from Lawrence over the course of the upcoming week – again, to make room for prisoners being shipped out of Pontiac.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which represents prison workers, is balking at the moves, saying the administration is endangering workers by shoehorning too many prisoners into already overcrowded facilities.

The state's maximum-security prisons currently hold about 9,230 inmates in space rated for 8,384 inmates.

AFSCME spokesman Anders Lindall said prison officials never hinted that Lawrence's mission as a prison might be changed.

"The department has not been forthcoming to anyone in this process," Lindall said.

The prison, located on 56 acres near the Lawrence-Richland county line, was opened in 2001.

Corrections spokesman Derek Schnapp said upgrading Lawrence has been part of the agency's plan all along, even though it wasn't mentioned in a series of hearings regarding the Pontiac closure.

Just as Pinckneyville guards are dealing with the influx of new prisoners, correctional officers at Lawrence also will have to make adjustments, union officials said.

Among issues that remained unclear Tuesday is the cost of upgrading Lawrence to a more secure facility. In addition, under union rules, guards who oversee maximum-security prisoners get higher pay.