ANGOLA — James “Black Mattie” Robertson, incarcerated longer than any person in the history of the Louisiana penal system, will be released on conditional parole to a Baton Rouge halfway house, the state Parole Board chairman announced Friday.

Robertson, sentenced to life imprisonment for raping a Tensas Parish woman in 1948, will be paroled Monday to Community Transition Center for a six-month work release program, board Chairman Keetsie Tullier said.

If Robertson successfully completes his work release/parole requirements, Tullier said, he will be released in January to the custody of Metairie carnival owner Robert Steele Sr., who has promised Robertson a lifetime job as a caretaker.

Robertson has been incarcerated 41 years, including approximately two years at East Louisiana State Hospital. He arrived at Angola in October 1951. Prison records list his age as 67, but he told reporters at a Parole Board hearing in April that he is 68.

“Right now I’m feeling real good,” Robertson said in a telephone
Robertson was paroled after serving six years of a 12-year sentence for attempted aggravated rape in Concordia Parish during the early 1940s, and was charged twice with crime against nature while at Angola.

During the April parole hearing, however, Robertson denied the sexual offenses and told the Parole Board he was a victim of the racial prejudice of the 1940s and prison conditions in the 1960s.

The board voted 4-0 to grant parole to Robertson on June 13, but the announcement was delayed until final arrangements for his stay at CTC were made. The board decided to begin parole at the privately-operated Baton Rouge facility "to ease his transition back into society," Tullier said.

"He could be facing a cultural shock back on the streets," she said. "We do not believe he is a danger to society. We do not believe he presents a physical risk," Tullier added.

Factors that influenced the favorable decision include his age, length of incarceration and commendable behavior towards two cousins, she said. The board also took into consideration that Robertson had not violated an 11-year prison sentence since 1977, had no significant prison rule violations since 1979, had an approved residence and job available in January.

Tullier said Robertson must seek mental health counseling during his stay at the Baton Rouge center and show a record of satisfactory job performance.

Some CTC officials will either seek employment for the parolee with a third party or employ him at the work release center.

Robertson said some of his work experience at Angola, including his time in the prison license plate factory and cannery, may not be useful at the work release center, but said "if I have a job, I'll like to do it." He added that the most recent job he had been janitorial work.

Steele told the board he took an interest in Robertson after reading about him in a 1988 article in "The Angola," the prison's news magazine. He said his personal investigation convinced him Robertson "got caught in the system" and "the biggest part of his prosecution was bigotry."

Robertson said Steele was traveling Friday and was probably unaware of the decision. "He gave me some numbers to call and I'm trying to reach him."

The Parole Board delayed a decision on Robertson’s case after he underwent psychiatric evaluation.

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Examiner Friday. He said the board's decision day has been "kind of a black day," and he was asked by his classification officer, "and of course I don't have confidence, (whether) to believe it. I feel a lot better now.

The decision was hailed by an administrator at the state's maximum security prison, where a recent rash of escapes, killings and suicides has prompted U.S. District Judge Frank Polito to order an emergency investigation.

"I think the Parole Board made a wise decision," said Roger Thomas, assistant warden for treatment. "Forty years is a long sentence.

The decision will have a positive impact on the institution without a negative impact on society in general."

Some Corrections Department officials and inmate leaders have said the spate of violence in may be partially attributed to prisoners' frustrations over the current conservative policy on clemency, paroles and prisoner furloughs.

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