THE JAIL BUSINESS

The Sheriff of Acadia Parish Will Run It, But Private Business, Not Taxpayers, Built It.

EXT MONTH IN CROWLEY A NEW JAIL WILL open that will be the first of its kind in the state. The structure is not particularly radical, nor are the inmates who will be housed there.

What makes the premise unique is that the prison was financed by private backers who in turn lease the facility to the Acadia Parish sheriff. "To my knowledge there may have been others that have done it, but I don't know about them," says Patrick LeBlanc, president of Louisiana Corrections Services Inc.

LCS is the link that made the venture possible by gathering together investors to fund the project. "We had been thinking about that all along," says Jason Leduc, the company's chief executive officer. "We found some investors in Florida. They were willing to take a risk, and it was a high risk."

There are some local investors, according to Patrick, but the majority of the financial backing comes from Florida, where Mike LeBlanc (another son) works in Clearwater. He manages the LCS office there as well as a branch of the LeBlanc Group, the architectural firm that designed the Acadia Parish jail and many others.

The alternative financing was devised as a means of generating funds when traditional government sources were not available. Acadia Parish voters twice turned down tax proposals in the mid-1980s to finance a new jail. The need for more jail cells continued to grow, however. "With the situation as it was, there had to be another alternative to providing jobs," says Patrick LeBlanc.

Consequently, he and his family got creative and built a private jail. It will be run by the sheriff but owned by LCS. The Acadia Law Enforcement District is the entity that will manage the facility, and it is headed by Acadia Parish Sheriff Ken Glapion.

What makes the entire concept work is that pay-back monies will be derived by housing state inmates at the new jail. Says Glapion, "Acadia Parish is in need of additional local space. It was to use the income derived from housing state and federal prisoners as a means of funding construction to increase the local bed space."

In fact, most of the 94 beds at the new jail will be occupied by state inmates. Gomp meets the arrangement is not intended to make money, but to fund the additional space that is needed for parish prisoners.

"We've had to give some real serious thought and consideration to this," says Gomp. "In order to gain extra bed spaces, we have to house state prisoners." The existing jail at the Acadia Parish Courthouse will remain open, at least for the time being, though it will be less cramped.

ORIGIONAL PLANS ALSO CALLED FOR housing inmates from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, but three months into construction, federal court Judge Frank Polonka put a halt to this practice. He issued a court order last summer forbidding Louisiana parish prisons from housing additional INS prisoners unless specifically approved by him. INS prisoners bring in $45 per day, versus the $21 daily rate that is paid for state prisoners.

This turn of events obviously cut off an expected source of revenue for the Acadia Parish project and called for a rapid regrouping. "We proceeded with our project. There's one thing you can count on in the jail business. There's always inmates," says LeBlanc. Some adjustments and considerable modifications had to be made, however. The management agreement had to be restructured to include lower monthly notes extended over a longer period of time, since the additional source of income was now state prisoners.

"We had promised investors a certain return based on the INS [prisoners]," says LeBlanc. "Of course they weren't happy about the numbers, but under the circumstances, there was nothing else we could do."

There is still some question as to whether the Acadia Parish jail even falls under Polonka's jurisdiction, since it is technically a private entity. Currently, however, Gomp does not intend to take any INS detainees. "Our plans are for the state prisoners right now," he says. If the ruling changes, then he'll reconsider.

The jail is a $1 million minimum security facility that features dormitory-style quarters. It will not include violent or high security risk individuals. It is located on Capitol Road, about three-fourths of a mile west of the courthouse.

A purchase agreement is not out of the question, says LeBlanc, but it would not be of the lease-purchase nature. "The sheriff has the option to purchase the facility at any time. At some point down the line, maybe he could find funds to purchase outright."

For the time being though, this sounds doubtful, given the voters' previous track record. And across the state, there's an abundance of prisoners and a shortage of space for all of them.

"THERE'S ONE THING YOU CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON IN THE JAIL BUSINESS. THERE'S ALWAYS INMATES," SAYS PATRICK LEBLANC, PRESIDENT OF LOUISIANA CORRECTIONS SERVICES, INC.

"People want criminals off the street, but they don't want to pay for it," says LeBlanc. "These sheriffs are mandated to uphold the law, but they can't do it because they've got no place to put those people. The state needs to grab the bull by the horns and address the inmate problem. It's something that's going to explode on them pretty soon."

Gomp thinks the idea might catch on if the current trend continues. "It's going to be a case-by-case thing and a parish-by-parish thing," he says. Undoubtedly, this first one will be closely scrutinized to determine its feasibility and/or profitability.

LCS has two other similar ventures in Louisiana. One in Madison Parish is near completion, and another is underway in Evangeline Parish with the city of Breaux.

While the prison in Acadia Parish is ready for occupancy, some details remain to be finalized before it opens in September. The sheriff continues to pore over the fine points of the contractual agreement with LCS, in order to make certain that everything is as it should be in this one-of-a-kind transaction.

"We want to be sure all the T's are crossed and the I's are dotted," says Gomp.