

# New county prison gets off to a rocky start

by L. Reidar Jensen

Just one week after the new Centre County prison took on its first inmates, and already there was controversy.

On Saturday, August 13, 2005 inmate Derick Michael Musser, who was serving time for shoplifting, ran away from the prison during a trip to take out the garbage. He was not accompanied by a guard - only by a civilian cook. The escapee was subsequently captured in downtown State College.

Additionally, there were questions about whether or not the prison's sally port, where prisoners are received and released, will fit

shoot him."

Centre County Commissioner Scott Conklin explained that nobody with violent tendencies would ever achieve trustee status, so the risk of violence was low. Even so, Conklin said a review of policies has begun.

"I am not happy at all with an escapee. We take the blame for this happening, and we have looked over policy and found ways to make sure this won't happen again."

Former county administrator Jon Eich feels the escape may have been a result of a lack of proper policy.

"We didn't have a civilian cook at the old prison - meals were prepared [by a third

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--Centre County Commissioner Scott Conklin

full-sized buses and ambulances. It has been determined that the sally port was designed to accept "school bus-sized" buses. However, the larger vehicles do fit, but just barely. County officials say a fix is in the works.

Musser was allowed outside of the prison's walls because he had earned 'trustee' status, a reward for good behavior. Despite the short time between prison opening and prison escape, county officials said the escape was something that could have happened at any time.

"[The inmate] had trustee status," said Centre County Commissioner Chris Exarchos. "We can't guarantee that one of these people is not going to do something stupid. Obviously this inmate decided to run. I mean, you know, we're not going to

party] and shipped over, so [the role of a cook as prisoner supervisor] would be a new policy for the new prison," Eich said.

Eich, Exarchos and Conklin all said the fact that there was an unguarded prisoner outside of the walls was not out of the ordinary in and of itself, with 72 work release prisoners leaving the prison to work by day and returning by night. Any of them could run away.

However, Eich felt that the escape may have been avoided under different circumstances.

"Little [officer] training, moving all of the male inmates to the new prison in a 24 hour period, and what may have been a questionable policy on which inmates can work outside the secure perimeter each contributed to this incident," Eich said.

Exarchos refuted Eich's claims.



The Centre County prison in Bellefonte

Photos by L. Reidar Jensen

"Mr. Eich's statements are just that - statements," he said. "We have a warden that has opened a number of prisons and we took his recommendations. The warden has done an excellent job."

Exarchos said that as far as he is concerned, the transition from the old prison to the new went off without a hitch.

"I think the transition was actually flawless. There was no breach of security."

Conklin said that at this point, his concern is not over what might have been done to prevent an escape, but over what should be done to minimize the chance of future escapes.

"I know people can go back and say, 'If we'd had a transition team for longer maybe this or that wouldn't have happened,' but I don't like to point fingers. I just want to figure out what needs to be done to correct the problem."



Participants in the county's "Slammer" were entertained by local musicians during their night in the new jail. The evening did little to contribute to the jail's training program.

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