



NEWS

What hath DOC wrought?

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ONE YEAR LATER

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On Saturday, Nov. 12, it will be one year since the Georgia Department of Corrections (DOC) relocated to Monroe County.

DOC commissioner Brian Owens said there is no question that DOC is operating more efficiently in the middle of the state and out of the hustle and bustle of downtown Atlanta.

"I just think it's a wonderful match," Owens said of the DOC and the local community. "I'm thrilled about the way we've been embraced by the community."



From left, DOC commissioner Brian Owens, then-Gov. Sonny Perdue and Tift alum Carey Russell cut the ribbon at Tift College one year ago this week.

Owens said DOC is already making a positive impact on the local economy. The DOC has offered inmate labor that has limited the cost of several city and county projects. DOC inmates will soon assist with city of Forsyth construction projects on Railroad Avenue and Tift College Drive, Owens said.

One way the DOC has considerably improved the city of Forsyth's finances is by purchasing city utilities. According to city clerk Janice Hall, the city bills the DOC about \$70,000 each month in utilities, which equates to about \$840,000 a year. Hall said the DOC is the city's single largest power customer.

However, the city's power revenue has actually decreased slightly in 2011 from 2010. Forsyth has taken in \$5.5 million through October 2011, which puts the city on pace to collect about \$6.6 million in 2011. In 2010, the city actually collected about \$7.1 million, which was up from about \$6 million in 2009 and about \$5.6 million in 2008.

Hall said the city began billing the DOC at the beginning of 2009 at about one quarter the amount it pays now.

The DOC also may be making a slight impact in local sales tax revenue.

According to figures provided by county finance director Kim Romine, Monroe County special purpose local option sales tax (SPLOST) proceeds are projected to be higher in 2011 than in 2010. Through September 2011, the county had collected just over \$4 million in SPLOST funds this year. If the county collects at the same rate for the remainder of the year, the county would take in about \$5.3 million. That total would be about \$100,000 greater than the nearly \$5.2 million in SPLOST the county received in 2010. Monroe County's 2010 collections were considerably greater than in 2009 when the county only took in about \$4.7 million.

Monroe County chamber of commerce director Tiffany Andrews said the chamber has not yet done a full-fledged economic impact study on the DOC's impact on Monroe County. However, Andrews said it is likely that the sales tax revenue increase can at least be partially attributed to the DOC's presence.

Dwight Levingston, manager of Ingles grocery store, which neighbors the DOC offices on Tift College Drive, said DOC employees are regular customers of his store.

"It's helped us a lot," Levingston said. "Especially in the deli."

Levingston said it is not uncommon for a large group of DOC trainees or administrators to drop by Ingles to purchase lunch or even dinner.

"They come in droves in the evening," Levingston said.

Levingston said he wished the store had a schedule for when DOC employees planned to show up, and they would have their food ready for them.

Employees at another nearby store, CVS pharmacy, said their business has improved as a result of DOC employees as well.

Kristen Stancil, public information specialist for the DOC, said employees do not receive discounts on food at the on-campus cafeteria and are free to eat at local restaurants. However, Stancil said the DOC has not tracked how often employees eat on or off the DOC campus.

Owens said he ordered prison vans removed so that trainees couldn't head down to Macon or Griffin to shop or eat, which was happening frequently when the offices first opened. Owens said now trainees have to walk wherever they go after hours, which has increased business at local establishments. Owens said he personally takes out-of-town visitors to the DOC to local restaurants, mentioning that he entertained the new director of the Georgia Public Safety Training Center at Grits recently.

However, not all nearby businesses have been helped enough by the DOC's arrival to sustain in a tough economy. In fact, two restaurants, Kool Beans/Warthen Hall and American Pizza, each of whom was located on Tift College Drive almost right next to the DOC offices, closed earlier this year.

But former state representative Jim Cole, who served as a strong supporter in the legislature of the DOC's move to Forsyth, said that the DOC's impact on the community goes beyond economic data.

"Forsyth's profile within the state has been increased," Cole said.

Cole said he has spoken with some state power brokers that have driven by the new facility and are impressed by the results. Cole said he would not be surprised if when the state economy improves, state officials take another look at moving additional state services out of Atlanta.

Cole said the DOC's move has given people the chance "to live in a quality town with a better cost of living." He said when he was serving in the legislature, he could never figure out why the DOC offices were in downtown Atlanta in the first place.

Owens said he did not know how many DOC employees have taken up residence in Forsyth, but he said he personally knows of at least a half-dozen that have moved or are in the process of moving. Owens said many employees desire to move to the area but have been unable to sell their homes. Eventually, Owens said he thinks more positions will open up that can be filled by Middle Georgians. He said, on average, the DOC gets hundreds of applicants when a job comes available.

Cole said the proliferation of jobs that could occur within Middle Georgia because of the DOC is one of the biggest reasons he wanted the DOC to relocate to Forsyth.

Cole said he wants his own children to have the opportunity years down the road to live and work in their hometown if they so choose. He said he imagines the DOC could have an effect in Middle Georgia much like that of Robins Air Force Base, except on a much smaller scale.

Forsyth real estate agent Jimmy Pace, who was the mayor of Forsyth when the DOC move was initially approved, said the addition of the DOC has come during a tough economic market. Pace said local real estate agents knew that it would take time for employees to be able to move to the area because of family concerns and the difficulty of selling property.

However, Pace said a number of employees are renting or leasing, and that he continues to receive regular inquiries from employees about relocating. In the meantime, Pace said the DOC move has been "very positive" for the area.

Pace said the DOC's status as Forsyth's single-largest utility customer and the DOC's more than \$25 million payroll are both good things for the local economy.

He also cited the lower cost of living and shorter drive times for why the DOC's move made sense.

Owens said he is personally enjoying a much quicker commute of about three miles each day. He said he only goes to Atlanta about five times per month now rather than everyday. He added one of the things he most enjoys is turning right onto I-75 South rather than left onto I-75 North because he knows he's not going to Atlanta for meetings but rather to the south end of the state for field work within the system.

One year after then-Georgia governor Sonny Perdue dedicated the new DOC South Offices, Owens said the DOC campus "looks prettier everyday." In fact, new outdoor basketball courts and the renovated president's house will be available for use soon.

Owens said of the DOC campus, "The neat thing is that it's going to be here forever."

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