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Forsythia Festival to celebrate 21 years
DOWNTOWN FORSYTH WILL BE BUSTLING WITH ACTIVITIES THIS WEEKEND

By Ashley Tusan Joyner - ajoyner@macon.com

A Ford Mustang revue and tours of Tift College are the newbies at Monroe County's Forsythia Festival, which turns 21 on Saturday in downtown Forsyth.

The arts fair kicks off at 10 a.m. with a classic car show along Johnston Street and a performance by the Middle Georgia Concert Band on the Jefferson Street stage. Events conclude Sunday at 5 p.m.

Beverly Walter, tourism director at the Forsyth-Monroe County Chamber of Commerce, said the festival is a hallmark event for residents who want to welcome spring.

"It really is an opportunity to show community pride. Something that the Cherry Blossom Festival (in Macon) does that we also do is encourage homeowners and businesses to have their windows painted with the festival's theme," Walter said.

Yellow bows and Forsythia sprigs, which are popping up around town, commemorate the occasion.

As one of the first regional arts events of the season, the Forsythia Festival attracts vendors from near and far, Walter said.

"People come from all over the Southeast," she said. "We expect about 25,000 visitors this year" - nearly five times the number of city residents.

Deidra Lynn Currie of Atlanta will be one of many featured visual artists.

"What she does is face painting and body art with a Mardi Gras, carnival style," Walter said. "Her art is very intricate and detailed, like nothing you've seen before."

Alex Chronis, a Greek chef from Knoxville, Tenn., is a well-liked longtimer.

"People always look for him," Walter said. "I do believe he's been here every festival."

The festival's Kids Korner will include Spider Mountain, other giant inflatable attractions and a rock-climbing wall.

The Miss Forsythia pageant, a bridal fair and community banquet took place earlier in the



Beau Cabell, The Telegraph
 Lisa Lowe, right, of Warner Robins listens to music in the courthouse square with Melissa Jado'o, center, and Jamila Chambers during last year's Forsythia Festival.

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week. Golfers in a festival tournament will tee off Friday at 10 a.m. at the Forsyth Golf Club.

The new Mustang Car Club Show is Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. on Johnston Street.

Walter said a large group of festival volunteers and community supporters help bring the festival together.

"Something of this magnitude would never happen without the work of many people and the city of Forsyth," she said.

By 2010, the Georgia Department of Corrections will relocate its headquarters from Atlanta to the historic Tift College campus, which overlooks Interstate 75 in Forsyth.

Assistant Corrections Commissioner Brian Owens said the move has an earlier phase.

"(It's) happening right now. This department has 15,000 or more employees and 10,000 are sworn law enforcement officers. We train thousands of officers at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center campus (in Forsyth) each year," he said. "But we've outgrown that facility. Tift College is just perfect for training. We will rehabilitate three dorms, where officers will be sleeping while receiving training."

Owens said the training academy should open by 2009. A year later, the department's State Offices South at Tift College, will bring between 400 and 500 payroll jobs to the area, Owens said.

"This makes sense because if you take a look at the state of Georgia, five large prison facilities are located in metro Atlanta and north. 35 facilities are in Macon and south," he said. "Having access to those prisons right in the middle of Georgia is key."

Saturday, Department of Corrections employees will give a public tour of Tift College at 2 p.m. Testimonials of Tift graduates will be recorded and archived.

"In the long term, we'd like to have a historical museum presence. We want to make sure we remember and make available the rich history of this college," Owens said.

The former site of a private liberal arts women's college, the 275-acre campus has been in virtual disuse since the late 1980s.

"All the buildings will need extensive rehabilitation," Owens said. "Inmate construction crews will be doing the majority of the demolition work and redoing windows."

Other festival activities include a 5K run that begins at 8 a.m. Saturday at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center off Indian Springs Drive.

Participants may register Saturday. There is a \$20 fee.

Later in the day, a two-band concert will play on the downtown square.

10 Below 0, a rock group featuring John Jones of Monroe County, will open up for Three On A String of Birmingham.

"The Three On A String show is supposed to be hilariously funny, but clean ... for the kids and grandma," Walter said. "They do some comedy, they do some skits as well as music. These guys have performed with symphony orchestras and bluegrass bands."

The festival is free and open to the public. For more information, visit www.forsythiafestival.com.

To contact writer Ashley Tusan Joyner, call 744-4347.

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