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CCA finishing 3rd prison in Eloy

By LINDSEY GEMME, Staff Writer

May 15, 2007

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ELOY - After a year of being in the construction phase, the newest Corrections Corporation of America prison here, Saguaro, is getting finishing touches before its June 26 grand opening.



Staff photo by Lindsey Gemme, Saguaro prison Warden Daren Swenson walks onto the prison site, still under construction in Eloy.

The Saguaro prison will be the area's third, and largest, prison, covering close to 160 acres about 100 yards away from the Red Rock prison on East Arica Road. Red Rock has had contracts with both Alaska and Hawaii to house prisoners, but once finished, Saguaro will house solely Hawaiian prisoners, and Red Rock will retain its Alaskans.

The new facility is built to hold more than 1,800 inmates with a total of 357 staff members, half of whom are still being hired. CCA is one of the biggest employers in the area, supplying nearly 1,300 jobs between the three prisons.

Daren Swenson, who came on board with the project in January as warden, is looking forward to Saguaro's completion.

"All the cells are ready to go, they just have to come in and clean and seal the floors, and it'll be done," Swenson told the Eloy Enterprise.

Swenson has a long history in corrections. He began in 1991 as a night shift supervisor in North Dakota and worked his way up to warden in 2001 in Oklahoma. He comes to Arizona as former warden of the Prairie Correctional Facility in Appleton, Minn. Swenson earned a bachelor's degree from North Dakota State University in 1992 in both sociology and psychology and has served as Appleton's Chamber of Commerce vice president and president-elect

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as well as having been the lead instructor-trainer for CCA's Incident Command/National Incident Management System.

He's been extremely involved in the tweaking and expanding of the prison's working design since his hire.

"(Coming to Eloy) was an opportunity to go into a brand new place and do a start-up. The main reason I wanted to do it is because you get to start a place off from scratch and make it how you want it. It's pretty exciting," Swenson says.

His main concern in the construction phase has been ensuring staff safety and security, with sufficient camera angles and locations, additional lighting and proper equipment.

"That's important for everybody. Not just the staff, but the inmates too, for their safety," he adds.

Saguaro, like the Eloy Correctional Facility and Red Rock, is designed like a campus surrounded by non-lethal stun fencing, with separate buildings linked by concrete pathways. There will be four general population buildings, one segregation and one high-custody building. Hawaiian inmates, who will arrive from Hawaii and other correctional facilities on the mainland sometime in late July or early August, will have work programs available to them in the kitchens, as curriers, etc. There will be a hobby shop, band room, self-paced GED programs and correspondence college programs, and even video conference visits with family back in Hawaii.

"There are four churches in Hawaii that are sponsors for this program so that the inmates can do video visiting to keep in touch with their families at their churches. It helps them keep better family ties," Swenson says.

What is also an interesting new development is the security team dynamic for all three prisons. In the past, each prison had its own security team that would respond only to situations at their own facility. Now, all three facilities are combining their teams into one large team that is trained together and responds together to any of the three area prisons.

"If five guys at Red Rock happen to be on vacation and it takes their team size down, it won't matter," Swenson explains. "They're all going to be trained on the same equipment, and all of them from all three facilities will respond."

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