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County gets prison land for \$1

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Franklin County Commissioners will pay \$1 for 19.3 acres of land at the Cumberland Valley Business Park where they plan to build a new jail.

The Letterkenny Industrial Development Authority (LIDA) unanimously agreed Monday to sell the land, which has a market value of \$868,500, to the county. LIDA, whose members are appointed by county commissioners, is developing a business park on about 1,350 acres of former Letterkenny Army Depot land north of Chambersburg.

Construction should begin in June with the prison operating in the first three months of 2007, according to Warden John Wetzel.

The county submitted a land development plan for the 440-bed prison to Greene Township in December. The township planning commission in January recommended that township supervisors approve the plan, according to township zoning officer Travis Brookens.

"We've been moving all along under the assumption it would be (in the business park)," Wetzel said. "We couldn't wait until everything was final. It would (have) set us back months."

The county owns land adjacent to the existing prison on Franklin Farm Lane, but preferred a site in the business park. Construction costs were projected to be higher on the limestone-rich land on Franklin Farm Lane.

The county last year borrowed \$38 million, \$30 million of it for prison construction. The typical taxpayer, the owner of a \$100,000 home, is paying \$33 a year to the county for prison debt.

The existing prison, built in the 1970s and added to in 1992, is designed to house about 200 prisoners. The average daily population in 2004 was 357. On Monday, the start of a three-day state inspection, the prison had 363 prisoners.

The prison will be at the end of Opportunity Avenue. The road, which hasn't been constructed, will open up more of the park for development.

"We think LIDA is going to benefit from this as much as we are," Wetzel said.

LIDA and the county are negotiating the county's share of improvements to infrastructure leading to the prison site, according to John Van Horn, LIDA executive director. Water and natural gas lines are already at the site.