

Aug 12, 2020 thecentersquare.com

### **Georgia city faces massive job, revenue losses when federal prison closes**

(The Center Square) – One rural Georgia city is about to lose its biggest private employer after a Federal Bureau of Prisons' decision to end its contract with a private prison. The D. Ray James Correctional Facility in Folkston, a town of about 4,000 residents between Waycross and Jacksonville, Fla., is scheduled to close at the end of September. Dr. Richard Smith has driven the "country roads" from his home in Fernandina Beach for the past nine years to the prison, where he works as a dentist. He is anxious because he and about 316 other employees at the prison are about to be unemployed. At 65 years old, Smith plans to retire early when the prison closes, but most workers at the facility have more at stake, he said. "It's very devastating to the community," Smith said. "There are [316] families that, in some cases, would lose the breadwinner of the family. Some who are single moms." Folkston Mayor Lee Gowen said the city will lose millions of dollars in revenue when the prison closes because of lost sewer-and-water fees. The prison facility makes up nearly half of Folkston's water-and-sewage system, Gowen said. Because of the closure announcement, the city also had to place a state-required system upgrade on hold. The upgrade could cost Folkston between \$10 million to \$12 million, Gowen said. GEO Group Inc., the company that owns D. Ray James, has sent a letter to the Georgia Department of Economic Development, giving notice of the mass layoff. The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) said it decided to let its contract with GEO Group "naturally expire" because more bed space is available at BOP-managed prisons. Smith said he was told the space became available in the public federal prisons because vulnerable inmates were released in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. U.S. Attorney General William Barr in March directed BOP to transfer nonviolent inmates who were at higher risk for COVID-19 complications to home confinement. Since then, BOP has placed 7,400 federal offenders in home confinement. The 1,500 prisoners at the Folkston facility do not qualify because they are not U.S. citizens. D. Ray James is the only of a dozen private federal prisons that is scheduled to close. "No other contract expirations have been discussed to date," BOP spokesman Justin Long said. The U.S. Justice Department in 2016, under the direction of Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, announced it would be phasing out the use of private contracted facilities. "They simply do not provide the same level of correctional services, programs, and resources; they do not save substantially on costs, and as noted in a recent report by the Department's Office of Inspector General, they do not maintain the same level of safety and security," Yates wrote in an August 2016 memo. President Donald Trump's administration has since reversed the decision. Critics of private prisons argue the corporations who own them cut corners to save money and pay staff less. Proponents argue privately managed facilities are less of a burden on taxpayers and the economy. Whatever the reason, Smith said the impact on the community, employees and residents of the facility is critical. Most of the businesses in the area are low-paying employers, such as fast food restaurants, he said. D. Ray opened in Folkston in 2010. Smith hopes another agency will step in and use the facility and save their jobs. "It's just shocking because we have done such a good job," he said. The state's Congressional leaders sent a letter to BOP Director Michael Carvajal in June and expressed concern over the closure's effect on the rural city and the rest of the federal prison population. "Phasing out a high-quality, cost-effective facility that will create significant job losses and likely result in furthering the public health crisis appears to be a very shortsighted decision," wrote U.S. Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue and U.S. Reps. Earl "Buddy" Carter and Doug Collins.