

Friday July 17, 2009
Joliet Prison Park Opens
Suburban Chicago News

05

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2009 | WWW.SUBURBANCHICAGONEWS.COM

JOLIET PRISON PARK OPENS

BY KAREN SORENSEN
For GO

The first phase of what Joliet city officials hope will be the transformation of the shuttered Joliet Correctional Center into a tourist attraction opens to the public Saturday.

A series of eight kiosks telling the story of 151-year-old limestone fortress is the chief attraction of Old Joliet Prison Park, a landscaped site immediately south of the prison building at 1125 Collins St. The grand opening celebration from 1 to 5 p.m. will feature live music by the Blooze Brothers Band, free mug shots and costumed pictures in front of the prison, children's activities, and refreshments.

"We're full force in favor of developing this attraction," says Rebecca Barker, marketing director for the city of Joliet. "It's our Disney World."

The park features a steel arch over the entrance reading "Old Joliet Prison," benches and picnic tables, and a landscaped area for the kiosks,

GRAND OPENING OF OLD JOLIET PRISON PARK

When: 1 to 5 p.m. July 18

Where: 1125 Collins St.

How Much: Free

Contact: Visit www.visitjoliet.org

which provide the building's history, including all of the films and television shows that have been made there. The most famous is "The Blues Brothers" with John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd, but the list also includes the just-released "Public Enemies," other movies such as "Derailed," "Stir of Echoes" and "Natural Born Killers," and the TV shows "Prison Break" and "The Untouchables."

The park cost about \$200,000 and was funded with a \$99,194 grant from the Illinois Bureau of Tourism and matching funds from the city of Joliet, Barker says. An intergovernmental agreement with the Illinois De-

partment of Corrections allows the city to use and maintain the site.

Joliet Correctional Center closed as a prison in 2002, and Joliet officials would like to strike a deal with the state for the historic building to be converted into a tourist attraction similar to Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay, Barker says. The Joliet prison already draws a number of visitors daily, particularly those making the Route 66 pilgrimage from Chicago to Los Angeles and detour over to see it, Barker says.

Part of the appeal is "The Blues Brothers," a now-classic film that opens with Joliet Jake being discharged from the prison's front entrance. But the other draw is the architecture. Designed by architect William Boyington, also responsible for the Chicago Water Tower and the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield, it features turrets, a four-leaf clover pattern and other detail work that make it visually interesting. Of course,



The old Joliet Correctional Center's building on Woodruff Road and Collins Street in Joliet in 2006.

it's hard to mistake it for anything other than a prison given the guard posts at each corner, the walls of bars that cover small windows and the 12-foot fence of barbed wire.

The structure's limestone was quarried by the inmates who would eventually move into it in 1858. During the Civil War, it housed both criminal

and war prisoners. However, running water and toilets weren't added until 1910, and when Stateville Correctional Center opened in 1925, the idea was it would eventually replace Joliet Correctional. Despite that intent, both remained functioning prisons until Joliet closed.

In addition to the live enter-

tainment on Saturday, the Joliet Police Department will be on hand to make child safety IDs with photos and fingerprints, radio station The Drive (97.1 FM) will be offering free giveaways, and the Joliet Area Historical Museum and the KidsWork Children's Museum will be providing kids activities.