

## Proposal could open old Joliet prison for tour

JOLIET — While most tourists come to Joliet to get their first "kick" on the Route 66 tour, what many really want is a chance to visit the home of Jake and Elwood Blues.

"They constantly say, 'We want more on the prisons, we want more on 'The Blues Brothers,'" said Mike Brick, development director of the Joliet Area Historical Museum.

And now, if Joliet can come to an agreement with the Illinois Department of Corrections, tourists may finally get that chance.

The city, through the museum, wants to offer tours of Joliet Correctional Center, better known as Joliet Prison. The prison, in the 1100 block of Collins Street in Joliet, closed in 2002.

The bus and walking tour would begin at the prison's west wall sally port, according to City Manager Jim Hock. It would be led by former guards of the prison.

Points of interest would include an original single cell dated 1853, the solitary confinement building, guard posts looking upon interior prison cells and an external wall corner guard turret. There would be no access to the interior of any buildings.

Tours would originate at the museum, according to the proposal. Visitors would be bused to the site. Tours would be conducted five afternoons per week between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Hock stressed that the plan is still in the idea stages and the city has not yet approached DOC about it. But those involved are excited about its potential impact.

"Joliet Prison is the No. 1 one thing we get asked about," said Greg Peerbolte, the museum's executive director.

The museum would charge about \$40 per person for the tour, Peerbolte said. Revenue would be used to pay for mowing, tour guide expenses, bus transportation, insurance, marketing and preservation foundation.

"The Department of the Interior's most visited site is Alcatraz Prison, with 2 million visitors each year," Peerbolte said. "Imagine what 10 percent of that number would be like for our prison."

The city's initial investment in the project would be relatively minimal: \$5,000 for handicap access to the guard area of the cell blocks, \$1,000 to repair a roof drainage pipe and some other repairs.

Ultimately, the goal would be to preserve the entire site, including all buildings, according to the proposal. A key concern is repair of the leaking roof over the prison's main structure, which the city estimates will cost \$1.3 million.

While tourism revenue will help with the preservation, funding also could come from other sources.

Peerbolte noted that the project likely would qualify for historic preservation grants, especially if it proves popular with tourists.

State Sen. Pat McGuire, D-Joliet, last year pushed legislation that would give tax credits to private developers who take over and redevelop state-owned surplus properties such as the old prison.

McGuire said he's "optimistic yet realistic" about developing the site as a "stabilized ruin" similar to what was done at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Eastern, known as the world's first penitentiary — a prison designed to

inspire penitence or regret — is now a popular historic site open year-round.

"While we want it to be made safe for public access, we don't have to make an ancient prison spic and span because the peeling paint and rusting bars only adds to its atmosphere," McGuire said.

McGuire said both DOC and Gov. Pat Quinn have been receptive about reuse plans for the prison property, which has been vacant for the past 12 years.

Future ownership of the 127-acre property would have to be determined, McGuire said. DOC currently provides security patrols and mowing on the site. DOC could retain ownership or the property could be sold or transferred through legislation to another government unit, such as the city, McGuire noted.

While no one was sure how long it would take to reach an agreement with DOC, Peerbolte said he was hopeful that tours could begin by August.