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Features

Central Unit Closes

After more than a century of public service, the Central Unit closed on August 31, 2011. This is the first closure of a Texas prison in the state's history and is the result of a combination of factors, to include legislative efforts to stabilize the number of incarcerated offenders through funding of treatment and diversion programs, continued suburban development west of Houston and budgetary constraints impacting all state agencies. Proceeds from the 326-acre property sale will go into the Texas capital trust fund.

The Correctional Institutions Division (CID), Human Resources Division and other divisions and departments within the agency have worked with staff to ease the transition, meeting with each Central Unit employee. Rick Thaler, director of CID, noted, "Correctional staff were given the opportunity to indicate their preferred location for transfer, and the Human Resources division made efforts to assign staff based on their selection." Unless they requested otherwise, the agency attempted to reassign staff within Region III. The majority of the correctional staff was able to take advantage of vacant correctional officer positions within that region. Through the reduction in force process, most non-correctional staff were also successfully placed in nearby units.

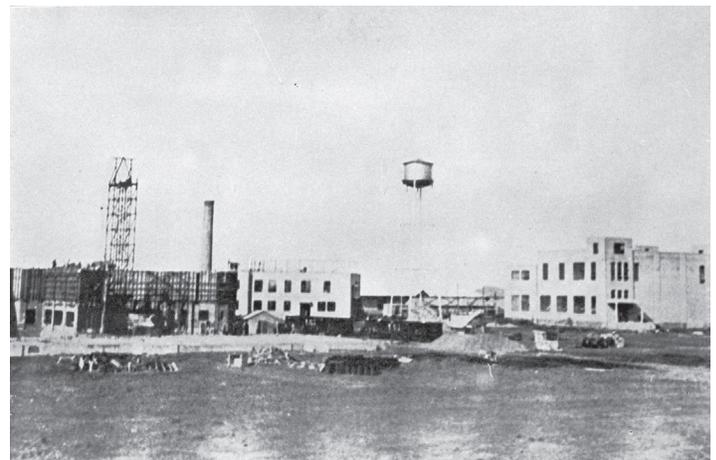
Mitigating the impact on current employees was an agency priority shared by policymakers, according to TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston, who also spoke about the significance of the decision from a policy perspective during the August board meeting, saying, "This is a tremendous opportunity for the State of Texas to close a prison unit. To a large extent, it can be attributed to the success of the treatment programs and the diversion initiatives that the legislative leadership and the Office of the Governor put in place in the past legislative sessions. The fact that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's populations are somewhat stable provided policy makers an opportunity to make those decisions is a remarkable success story."

Chairman of the Board of Criminal Justice Oliver Bell also com-

mented, "The closure of the Central Unit has been a positive story and I'm pleased the current trends have allowed the board and TDCJ to be able to close a unit. Crime rates are down and offender populations are relatively flat. The Central Unit has been studied for closure for the last six to eight years."

During August 2011, the offender population was transferred from the Central Unit to other TDCJ facilities. The beds at the Central unit were officially removed from the count of state correctional capacity effective September 1. Some functions located at Central but unrelated to unit operations, such as a regional warehousing and transportation hub, remain in place while preparations for their relocation are finalized.

*The brief history of the Central unit which follows is based on a monograph entitled *The Texas Department of Criminal Justice's Central Unit and its Historical Significance*, written by Don Hudson. It is used with his permission.*



This 1931 photo shows construction of the Central Unit one year prior to opening. The meat packing plant on the far right was the first finished building on the unit.

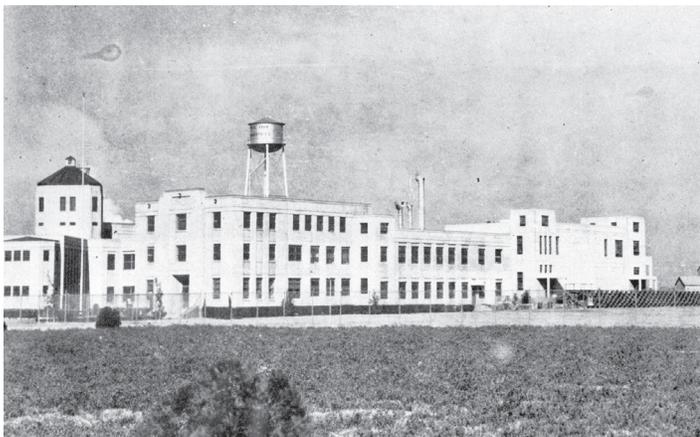
Photo from TDCJ archives

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The property which would become the Central Unit began as a sugar cane plantation. In 1878, Colonel L.A. Ellis partnered with Colonel E.H. Cunningham to operate a private penitentiary and lease inmate labor to work the cane fields and onsite sugar mill. In the early 1880's, the state took over supervision of inmates while continuing to lease their labor to private interests.

After Ellis' death in 1896, the Imperial Sugar Company was created to acquire and operate the farm. In 1908, 5,235 acres of land in Fort Bend County was sold to the state of Texas for \$160,000 to raise revenue for the company. The state operated the enterprise as the Imperial State Prison Farm, using around 400 inmates to raise sugar cane, cotton and corn. Surplus offender labor was still leased to outside, private interests.



In the 1930s, the Central Unit encompassed 5,235 acres of prime farmland in Fort Bend County. Cotton, sugar cane and other crops were grown to help sustain the unit.

Photo from TDCJ archives

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A 1909 Texas legislative committee investigation found deplorable conditions at leased camps and state-owned farms. New laws were passed and soon took effect, improving conditions significantly. Soon, the investigating committee ranked the Imperial camps as "among the best equipped and most sanitary camps in the system."



This 1985 photo of the Central Unit shows the Sugar Land Airport in the upper right. By the summer of 2011, the prison had suburban neighborhoods as close as 500 yards away.

Photo from TDCJ archives

In the 1920s, privately-financed studies of the Texas prison system criticized the treatment of inmates, lack of rehabilitation and poor management of prison farms. In 1927, the Legislature dissolved the three-member Board of Prison Commissioners and established the nine-member Texas Prison Board, which included four prison reform advocates appointed by Governor Dan Moody. One of their first objectives was to centralize the prison system in order to standardize and improve classification and job training. They chose to begin their reform program at the new Central Unit.

Construction of the current Central Unit facility began in 1930 and was finished in late 1932. Built by inmate labor, the 12-acre fenced compound contained a main building for administration and inmate housing, a meat packing plant, a cannery and a power plant. The unit was a medium-security institution designed to house 250 inmates. In 1936, Central and two added farm camps held an inmate population of nearly 700. Many of these original structures have since been designated Texas Historic Landmarks.

By 1939, most of the unit's wooden structures were replaced with brick-and-concrete buildings, including a new building to house inmates, the Central Two Camp. Central Two was later converted into a warehouse, then closed in 1999 and sold to the City of Sugar Land, which reopened it as the Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land.

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After the Second World War, suburban growth surged in the United States and so began a slow encroachment toward the grounds of the Central Unit. The 1959 incorporation of the City of Sugar Land and rapid expansion of suburban Houston accelerated the trend. The unit's soap and detergent factory continued to operate, but farm crops dwindled as much of the original land purchase was sold off for development. By 2007 an airport and housing development stood within a few hundred yards of the prison perimeter. ●



Once surrounded by farmland, the Central Unit is now flanked by subdivisions and highways.

Photo from Google Map