

Super-jail won't be perfect, but it will be better, corrections minister tells Chamber breakfast

By IRENE GENTLE
The Champion

Community safety, cost efficiency and whittling down offence rates are the goals behind a provincial overhaul of the correctional system, said Ontario's Corrections Minister Rob Sampson.

He attended a Milton Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting held at Granite Ridge Golf Club Thursday to speak about the changing face of the Maplehurst Correctional Complex.

When the construction dust settles next spring, Maplehurst will hold about 1,200 male inmates and 324 female inmates.

Of those, the vast majority will be on remand, or awaiting trial or sentencing.

The remainder will be provincial prisoners sentenced to two years or less.

A rampant recidivism rate is one reason the corrections system was in need of refurbishing, said Mr. Sampson.

Though he admitted the details are sketchy, the best statistics available place the rate of prisoners who reoffend at about 80 per cent.

"We have 80 per cent of people in the front door coming back in again," said Mr. Sampson. "We better figure out how to get this reoffending rate down."

System to be revamped

Revamping the system so that better tabs can be kept on those who reoffend is a good place start, he said.

"We don't very effectively measure rehabilitation rates," said Mr. Sampson. "Surprising, but we don't."

Noting some operating jails are so old they pre-date confederation, he said a commitment to public safety has led to the creation of new and retrofitted mega-jails.

The new facilities will be no-frills, but packed with state-of-the-art security measures aimed at cracking down on recidivism rates while cutting costs.

Rehabilitation programs, linkages with community agencies upon inmate release and universal standards and results measurement are part of the plan.

"These standards would apply to all facilities whether they be privately or publicly run," said Mr. Sampson. "We need to compare institutions and find out what works and what doesn't work."

When it's completed, Maplehurst will be the largest facility of its kind not only in the province, but the country. It'll also be one of the few jails to combine sentenced and remanded prisoners.

Completed by November

An \$89 million construction project has been underway at the jail for some time. By November, four 192-person units should be completed.

They'll be self-contained and split into six wedges, holding about 30 inmates each.

Another wedge will house an enclosed outdoor exercise area, while an eighth would be an activity area, which would house a video remand studio.

The video studio would allow the inmates to attend court for whistle-stop appearances via a closed circuit television, saving transportation costs to far-flung courts.

In the late fall, the current Maplehurst population is expected to slide into these new units, allowing construction crews to retrofit the existing facilities.

A separate female facility, headed by Superintendent Sheree Cybulski, will round out the site.

Acknowledging concerns about the impact on local health care, Mr. Leithead said 43 on-site nurses will supply 24-hour health

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ROB SAMPSON

and psychiatric care for the inmates, said Maplehurst Superintendent Ian Leithead.

The Province is also working on a discharge policy to set aside worries that inmates won't be ambling down Main Street upon release.

Currently, all sentenced inmates are escorted to a bus headed for their home town.

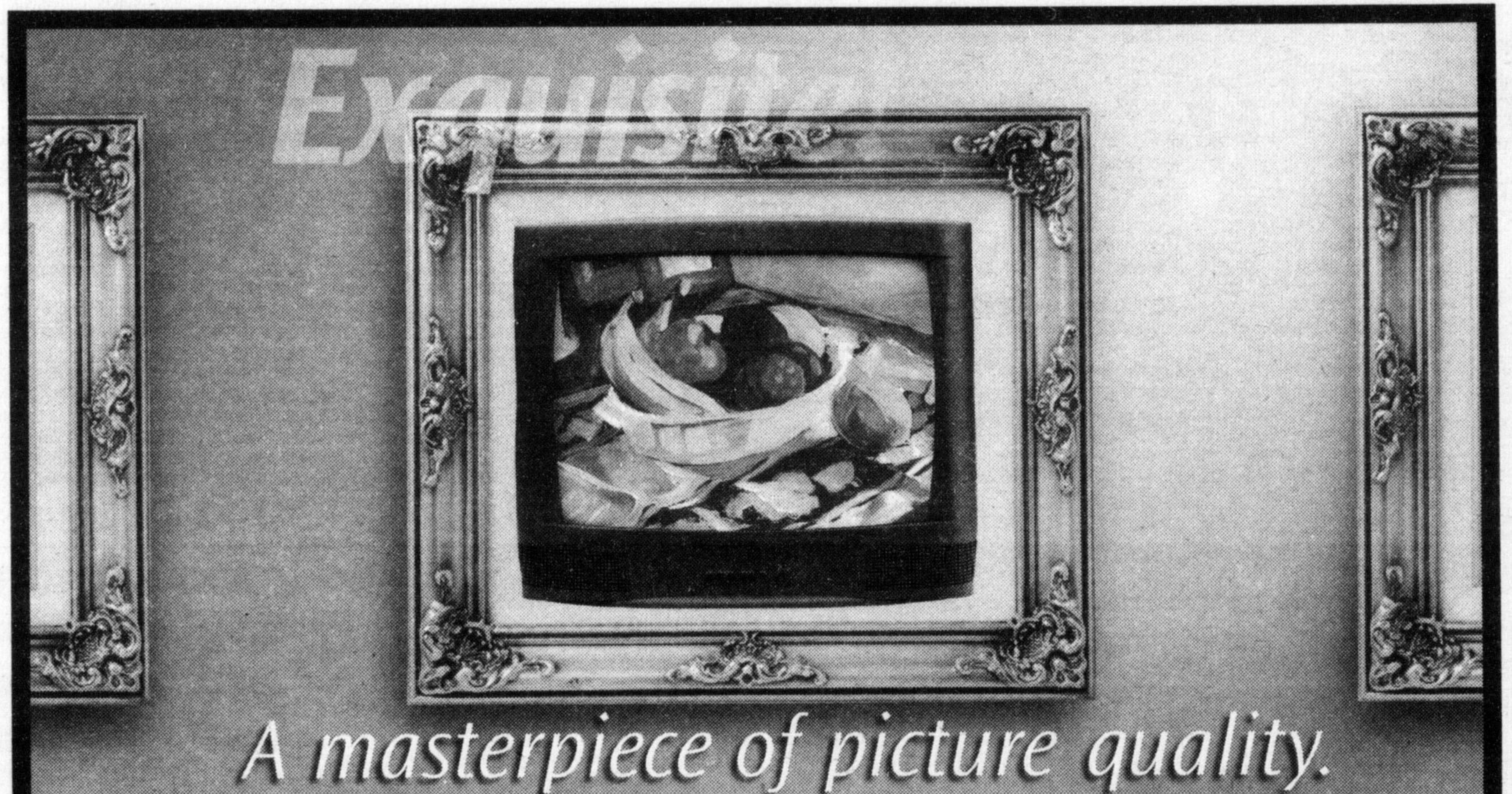
In the future, that will likely be followed up with a linkage to a community agency, which will continue the rehabilitative work started behind prison walls.

But remanded prisoners are more difficult to escort off the premises because there's no way of knowing when they'll be discharged, said Mr. Leithead.

Despite that, all mentally disordered inmates will either be driven to their home communities or picked up at the jail by an agency from that community, he said.

The new system doesn't have all the answers but it's at least asking the questions, said Mr. Sampson.

"It's not going to be perfect, but it's going to be a heck of a lot better than what we have now, which is nothing," he said.



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