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By Barbara Tetreault

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BERLIN – U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen and U.S. Congressman Charlie Bass joined federal Bureau of Prison officials Friday at a ribbon cutting ceremony officially marking the opening of the Federal Correctional Facility in Berlin.

The prison accepted its first minimum-security inmates last month and the first medium security inmates are expected early next year.

"This is a great milestone for this facility," said J.L. Norwood, BOP Northeast regional director.

Federal Bureau of Prison Director Charles Samuels thanked the state's Congressional delegation and local officials for their efforts to promote the prison.

"I know it's been a long hard road to get to this point," he said. "I can tell you we will work hard to be good neighbors."

About 200 people attended the invitation-only ceremony held inside the prison. The event also served as a staff recognition ceremony honoring the work of Warden Deborah Schult and her team in activating the new facility.

The city, under then Mayor Robert Danderson, made a formal application to the federal BOP in May 2002 to host a federal prison after a second referendum on the issue overwhelmingly passed.

Shaheen (D) and Bass (R) said the siting of a federal prison in Berlin has been a bi-partisan effort and both credited the work of former U.S. Senator Judd Gregg (R) who got the \$276 million to construct the prison approved by Congress. Once the construction was complete, the prison sat empty for about a year as money to activate it was held up by the budget impasse in Congress. Bass and Shaheen last November successfully got funding to open the prison through their respective legislative bodies.

"I didn't know if I'd still be alive to see this day," Bass joked.

Shaheen spoke about the economic impact the project will have on the North Country. She said the prison will employ 340 people when fully operating with an annual impact of \$40 million. Shaheen noted 138 are currently employed at the prison.

"This is a wonderful new beginning for the city of Berlin," said Berlin Mayor Paul Grenier. "The economic impact that the prison will have on the region will be the largest boost in northern New Hampshire since the mills opened in the 1930s and 1940s

Samuels said the 1,152-bed prison is needed to alleviate overcrowding in the federal system

when the number of facilities has not kept pace with the inmate population. He said there are currently 218,000 inmates in federal prisons.

"The reality is we really need these beds," he said.

Samuels said corrections staff have one of the toughest jobs in law enforcement as they work to make a positive difference in the lives of inmates. He noted that 95 percent of inmates are eventually released to rejoin society.

"We are an agency that cares," he said.

Schult recognized the work of the Northern N.H. Talent Team in preparing local people and businesses to compete for jobs in the prison and to provide needed goods and services. She said the talent team also helped incoming staff arrange housing, education, and day care services.

"You've done a remarkable job transitioning our staff into this community," Schult said.

The warden also praised her staff, citing the expertise of the seasoned personal and the energy provide by the new hires.

"We have more work to do but we have much to be proud of in all we have accomplished," she said.