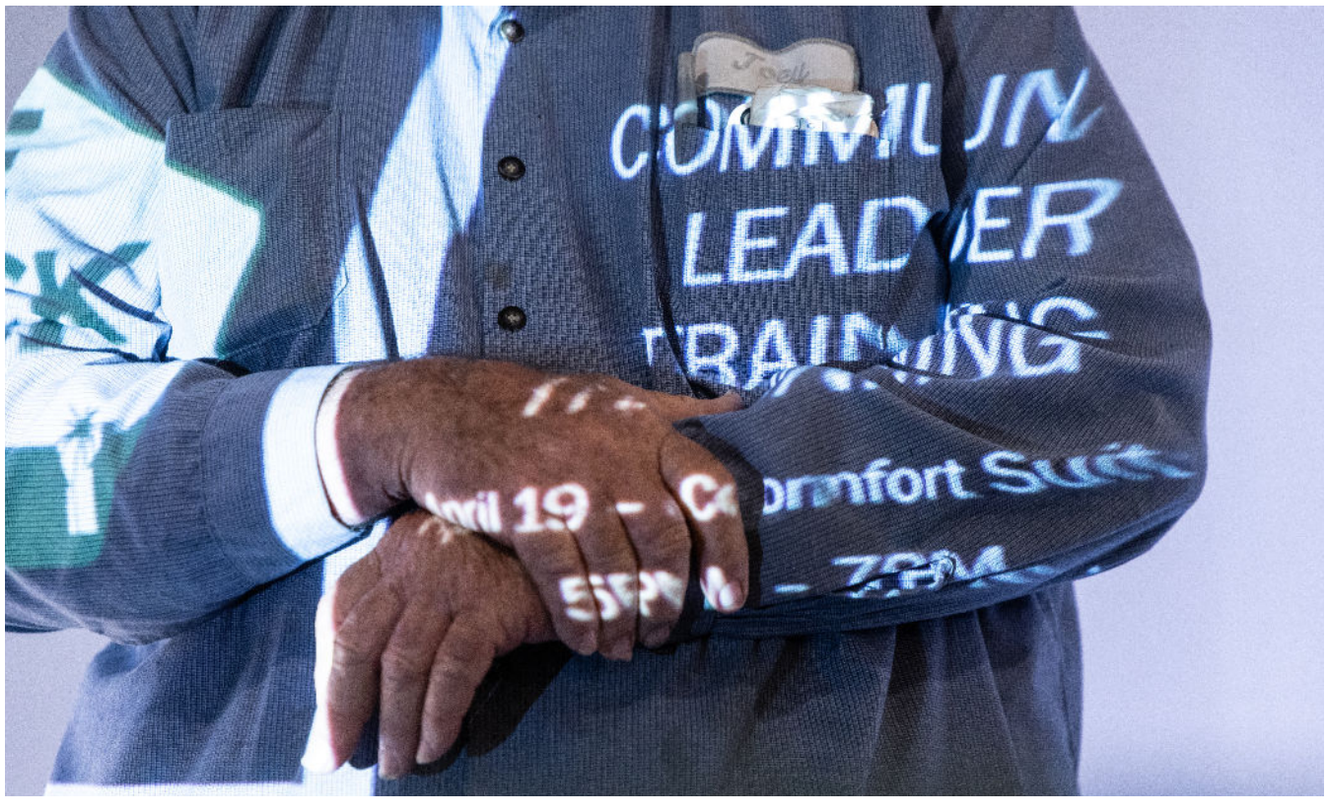


On a warm April evening, members of the Blythe Chamber of Commerce gathered inside the dimly lit dining room of the Comfort Suites, just off Interstate 10.

As a father and son jumped into the hotel's pool outside, Amy Conrad from the public relations firm Tripepi Smith was giving a presentation on how community members could become leaders in the fight to keep Chuckawalla Valley State Prison open.

"This is a city that actually wanted the prison here, and you are a city that doesn't want the prison to go away, so it is very important to make your voices heard," Conrad said to the packed room. "This is what tonight is all about: to teach you how to make your voices heard and what you can do."



Blythe Mayor Joseph "Joey" DeConinck stands with his arms crossed as he waits for the community leader training to begin. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

Those in attendance included local business owners, city officials and other residents interested in learning more about the Save Chuck campaign, an effort launched in March that hopes to stave off the closure of the community's second largest employer.

Last December, the city found out through a public press release that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) was planning to close the prison.

"We had heard hours prior from employees, because they were told just a few hours before that press release was issued, but there's been no communication at all with the city, other than us pushing for answers, pushing for those meetings," Mallory Crecelius, city clerk/interim city manager, told the group. "So it's just really baffling that they could do this to a community without ever first consulting."

CDCR said the prison was chosen for a number of reasons including cost, housing needs and the impact of the closure on the workforce. The impending closure, tentatively slated for March 2025, is not the first time the city has had to come together to fight for the prison.

Controversial from the start

CDCR broke ground on what would become Chuckawalla Valley State Prison in March 1987, five years after a state law mandated a new state prison be built in Riverside County.

The original plan was for a 1,700-bed medium-security prison to be constructed in the Coachella Valley, but news reports from the time said staunch opposition from those communities turned the spotlight to Blythe.

Then-state Sen. Robert Presley (D-Riverside) told the *Palo Verde Valley Times* in July 1984 that the community was a "nice, viable city," for the project, even though it came with a major obstacle caused by its remoteness. The city is 175 miles from Riverside and more than 200 miles from Los Angeles. Later that month, Presley told the paper Blythe was a "frontrunner" for the new prison.



The Palo Verde Valley Library in Blythe has folders full of newspaper clippings documenting the history of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison. (Alicia Ramirez/The Riverside Record)

After the announcement, local opposition began to mount. A committee to oppose the prison was formed Aug. 20, 1984, during a community meeting at the Blythe Riviera Marina that attracted roughly 50 people, including farmer Jack Marlow.

Marlow, who came to the area in 1903 and was widely regarded as one of the community's founders, told the *Palo Verde Valley Times* that if a state prison were to be built in the city, the "lawless days of Blythe will be remembered as child's play."

"We're not used to this type of human living in our midst," he said. "The people that are locked up in these prisons are mean and vicious. It's bad enough to have a local jail."

The pro-prison committee was formed a week later during a meeting at Blythe City Hall that saw a much smaller crowd of about 10. The committee, which included then-Mayor Ernie Weeks, argued that

the prison would reverse the area's decline in population and business and provide a much-needed economic boost, the *Palo Verde Valley Times* reported.

The following month, the Blythe City Council voted unanimously to draft a resolution in support of constructing a state prison in the Blythe area.

"I had concerns at the early stages of the discussion," the *Palo Verde Valley Times* reported Weeks said at the meeting. "I have a great deal of love for this town and am concerned with the quality of life in this town.

"I think Blythe is a desirable place to live and it will be even more so if the department of corrections puts a facility here," he continued.



Mayor Joseph "Joey" DeConinck stands beside his truck during the April community leader training meeting. DeConinck moved to Blythe in 1972, but said he wasn't really involved in the prison discussion. "I was farming," he said. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

Weeks was not the only member of the council who had concerns when the idea of building a state prison in Blythe was first floated.

"I'm one of those who had fears," the *Palo Verde Valley Times* reported then-Councilmember Doris Morgan said at the meeting. "I was sure they would escape and find me at home alone.

"Based on the economics alone, I could not vote 100% for it," she continued. "But after the impact committee's findings, I was able to list out the pros and cons and found the pro column to be much longer than the negative."

The city's endorsement was followed by endorsements from the Palo Verde Community College District Board of Trustees, the Palo Verde Unified School District Board of Trustees, the Palo Verde Hospital and the Blythe Chamber of Commerce. The only major public agency to oppose the prison at the time was the Palo Verde Irrigation District, the *Palo Verde Valley Times* reported.

By December, Blythe had become the clear favorite with CDCR listing the area's two potential sites as its top choices in a draft environmental impact report.

But over the next few months, progress stalled as tension over where to place the prison grew, so on the evening of April 27, 1985, three busloads of pro-prison Blythe residents left the city headed for Sacramento to make their voices heard.

“The situation is very serious and critical,” Mike Figueroa, pro-prison committee chairman, told the *Palo Verde Valley Times*. “It will have a snowball effect. It is much more serious than we realize.”

The next morning, the residents rallied on the steps of the California state Capitol in hopes of forcing the state Legislature to move forward with selecting a site.

The following month, CDCR said a compromise site at Wiley’s Well, where both Chuckawalla Valley and Ironwood state prisons are located today, was a viable option for the prison.

The site, roughly 20 miles west of the city, was said to have the necessary resources for the prison, but progress on officially choosing the site seemed once again to stall.

By December 1985, with the project continuing to move forward at a snail’s pace, those in favor of the prison remained optimistic.

“I feel good about it,” Weeks told the *Palo Verde Valley Times*. “I am not the least bit discouraged.”

Three years later, on Dec. 5, 1988, CDCR activated Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.

“They worked hard to get it there,” Blythe Chamber President Kati Cusick, daughter of former chamber president and pro-prison committee leader Wayne Cusick, said. “And, truly, the same reason that we needed it then is the same reason why we need it to stay open.”



Satellite imagery shows Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, right, and Ironwood State Prison. (Maps Data: Google, ©2023 CNES/Airbus, Maxar Technologies, USDA/FPAC/GEO)

On Feb. 1, 1994, CDCR activated Ironwood State Prison on the same 1,700-acre complex. Ironwood State Prison currently houses nearly 3,200 inmates and Chuckawalla Valley State Prison houses just over 2,000, according to a CDCR report. Together, the prisons employ roughly 1,800 people, with Chuckawalla Valley State Prison accounting for roughly 800, according to a CDCR report.

Chuckawalla Valley State Prison also maintains the fire house, water treatment plant, wastewater treatment plant, vehicle maintenance garage, recycling and salvage program and laundry services for both prisons.

“So, [Chuckawalla] would be ‘an empty housing unit,’ but they would still have to run all those things just so they could run Ironwood State Prison,” Lauren Ray, a longtime Blythe resident whose husband works at Ironwood State Prison, said. “Now, if that happens, who’s to say that they won’t want to close Ironwood State Prison down.”

Small town, big impact

The city of Blythe was incorporated in 1919. Located on Highway 60, nicknamed the Sunkist Trail by local garage operator E.R Fairbanks, the town was a natural stopping point between Las Cruces, New Mexico and Los Angeles.

“Blythe, a lot of people say you’re in the middle of nowhere, which in some cases for certain things we are,” Cusick said. “But we also feel like we’re a hubcap in the middle of everywhere, because you know, if you look on the map, you can go an hour and a half in almost any direction, and you get somewhere.”

Photographs from the 1950s on display at the Palo Verde Historical Museum and Society show a bustling town with gas stations on every corner, department stores catering to every taste and countless community events put on year round by the city’s many social clubs.



The Palo Verde Historical Museum and Society has hundreds of items on display documenting the city’s early years. This corner display is dedicated to the history of the Jaycee Rodeo. (Alicia Ramirez/The Riverside Record)

That all started to change in 1965 when Interstate 10 was completed. The new highway allowed drivers to bypass Blythe, and over the following decades, photos of the city’s main thoroughfare, Hobsonway, show the gas stations slowly disappearing, department stores closing, and community events dwindling.

Between 1950 and 1960, census data shows the city’s population growing by nearly 50%. But over the next 10 years, the growth rate slowed to a mere 17%, and by 1980, the city’s population was in decline, falling from just over 7,000 in 1970 to 6,800 in 1980.

After Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, and subsequently Ironwood State Prison, were opened, the city’s population, which includes those incarcerated at the prisons, swelled in 2010 to a high of more than 20,000, according to Census data.

That growth prompted a rush of new development. The community, which had been without a movie theater for years, suddenly had one again. Stores and restaurants were opening and there was new residential development to accommodate the prisons’ workforce.

“This used to be a pretty big town when I first moved here,” Ray said. “There were like four grocery stores, there was a Kmart, we had a movie theater.”



All Star Cinemas opened in 1997 and closed in 2010. The space left behind by the movie theater has been available for lease for years. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

City officials said there is not a single part of the community that has not been positively impacted by the construction of the prisons. On the flip side, they said there's not a single facet of the community that won't be negatively impacted if Chuckawalla Valley State Prison is closed.

"It's a very poor community in terms of not having a lot of resources, particularly for healthcare," Sandra Anaya, CEO of Palo Verde Hospital, said.

Anaya said the hospital, the only one within 50 miles of the city, is able to provide the level of care it does because of the money it receives for treating people incarcerated at the prison. If that revenue were to dry up, she said it would make it more difficult for the hospital to continue to serve the community.

"We're a rural facility, it's small, but we're at least able to treat, stabilize and transfer patients who are beyond our capability to take care of," she said. "So if the hospital closed because of declining revenue, residents would have to wait a long time before they got EMS service for a 911 call, and that has the potential for increasing the morbidity and mortality in the community."

When it comes to the college and the school district, officials said the impacts would be both immediate and long-lasting.

"The direct impact to the closure is we figure about 250 full time students," Don Wallace, Palo Verde College president, said. "And that equates to about $2 million in a reduction to our annual fund budget from the state."

Palo Verde College, which just celebrated its 75th anniversary, was one of the pioneers of inmate education and piloted the online education program used across the state.

"We have been a very leading advocate for anything the state wanted to do with inmate education," Wallace said. "And so this is really a slap in the face to Palo Verde College."

He said the decision showed a "complete disregard for the economy, for logic and reason," and would negatively impact the college's incarcerated students.

"When those students get uprooted and move to other prisons, it's difficult for them to continue their education," Wallace said. "They're all on educational plans, and when any of those inmates complete a college certificate or degree, the recidivism rate when they're released from prison is virtually zero."

Wallace said he was confident that the college would be able to recoup the lost revenue by increasing enrollment at the 12 other prisons it serves throughout the state, but his bigger concern was what he called the "ancillary impact to the community."

"If jobs are lost, and people move away, then that is really going to affect the college," he said. "I don't know how to quantify that for you, but certainly, if you're losing your population, and you're losing your wage earners, taxpayers, out of the district, there will be an impact of that that we can't even begin to calculate."



The Palo Verde High School Yellowjackets Hall of Fame at the Palo Verde Historical Museum and Society features photos of 2022 inductees Brian Johnson, James "Peanut" Smith and Roberta Camacho on the back wall. (Alicia Ramirez/The Riverside Record)

At Palo Verde Unified School District, a school system already struggling with declining enrollment, Superintendent Tracie Kern said in a video posted to the city's YouTube channel that the school would do what it could to mitigate the impacts of the prison's closure.

"It was a short notice to be informed of this big decision, and we have staff members that their spouse is employed by Chuckawalla, students' parents are employed by Chuckawalla, and displacement of those families to our community and to our school district is going to have a profound impact," she said. "We're going to try our best to buffer that impact for our community and for our students, but it could have a profound impact to our school district."

The closure would also impact the Palo Verde Valley Transit Agency, the only public transit operator in eastern Riverside County. The agency provides affordable rides to those visiting or working at the prison, with the state subsidizing the cost for prison employees.

"Our transit agency is concerned that they would have to cut service and staff because they do have major trip generators to the prisons," Crecelius, city clerk/interim city manager, said.

The biggest impact of all would be to the city, has gone from a deficit of more than $3 million to a surplus of more than $3 million since 2008.

"We recognized where we were and what we needed to do to better improve our financial situation," Crecelius said. "And since then, the last report they did, we're now No. 9, which is still not fantastic, but shows that we are making improvements.

"And I think we finally felt like we could see the light at the end of the tunnel," she continued. "And then when we got word that the state was going to close our prison, to me, it felt like we were just being pushed back 10 years."



Mallory Crecelius, city clerk/interim city manager, is one of the driving forces behind the Save Chuck campaign. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

Vice Mayor Johnny Rodriguez said leading up to 2008, the agriculture community was hard hit by changing labor laws, mechanization and changes in water allocations that led farmers to leave their land unsown in exchange for guaranteed payment.

“Those that participate will fallow up to 30% of their lands,” he said. “So that, in turn, what happens is they need 30% less materials, 30% less labor, so the business that had a nexus to agriculture, they lost 20% to 30% of their business because it went out with the fallowing.”

Then when the recession hit, Rodriguez said many of those farms on both sides of the state line closed, which led the businesses that supported them to close and left the city in a dire situation. And as the recession continued, additional businesses, including the city’s only movie theater, closed.



Vice Mayor Johnny Rodriguez has used his background in law enforcement to help inform the Save Chuck campaign’s platform. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

But since that time, Crecelius said officials have made a lot of hard decisions to get the city back on track financially. She said the city was finally at a place where it was going to be able to increase staffing, reinvest in deferred maintenance and launch new programs to better serve the community.

“We felt like we were on our way up after the pandemic,” Rodriguez said. “We had some economic interest come look at us — and I wish I didn’t get so optimistic — and then the state, it was like a kick to the stomach when they announced it.”

“It’s like we’re walking against a heavy wind,” Crecelius said. “We’re pushing, pushing, pushing to do better for the city of Blythe, and this wind just keeps pushing us back.”

In its release, CDCR said it was working to minimize the negative impacts of closing Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, by transferring and redirecting prison staff as possible, and fostering a “bottom-up economic resilience plan for the community.”

However, Crecelius said there is no mitigating the loss of community members.

“Those are people in our community that provide enhanced services. They have spouses who live and work in the community,” she said. “So if a correctional officer were to relocate and his spouse is a teacher, now our school district is going to lose a valuable employee as well.”

Since peaking in 2010, Census data shows the community’s population has declined almost 15%, dropping to just under 17,800. If the prison closes, the population will continue to fall, making progress that much more difficult.

“If our town continues to decline, and this would certainly exacerbate that decline, if people have to leave town to find jobs elsewhere, you know, we may be the next ones to say we can no longer support ourselves as a city,” Wallace said. “If that happens, it’s bad for all of us.”

But there’s still time for CDCR to change course, and officials across Riverside County say there’s a viable alternative to closing Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.



Information handed out at the April community leader training gave comparisons between the two prisons for the cost of maintenance and cost to house inmates among other talking points. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

All eyes on Horsetown USA

About 190 miles west of Blythe lies the city of Norco. In the heart of the Inland Empire, the community is nestled between the cities of Riverside, Jurupa Valley, Eastvale and Corona.

Known as Horsetown USA, Norco is also home to the California Rehabilitation Center, a medium-security Level II correctional facility with an inmate population around 3,000. For more than a decade, there have been discussions about closing the facility.

“If you go back as early as like 2012, there were some efforts and discussions about closing the prison at that time,” Norco Mayor Robin Grundmeyer said. “So it’s not something that’s new for our community. It’s something that has been discussed and brought up for several years now.”



Satellite imagery shows the location of the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco. (Maps Data: Google, ©2023 Airbus, CNES/Airbus, County of San Bernardino, Maxar Technologies, U.S. Geological Survey, USDA/FPAC/GEO)

Built on the shore of Lake Norconian and opened in 1928, the property was originally home to The Lake Norconian Club, a resort for Hollywood’s elite.

“It was absolutely phenomenal,” Su Bacon, president of The Lake Norconian Club, said. “It was a place where the stars came.”

Bacon said the resort offered guests a luxurious getaway from the bright lights of Los Angeles and featured hot springs, spas, pools and a bustling nightlife scene.

“It was a remarkable resort,” she said. “And then, sad but true, due to the Depression. everything slows down, and the resort had to close the doors.”

After it closed, the U.S. Navy took possession of the resort and gave the property a second life as a hospital treating some of the first survivors from the attack on Pearl Harbor.

“It became a tremendous hospital, to the point that [then-First Lady] Eleanor Roosevelt came to visit,” Bacon said. “A lot of the stars of the time, Bob Hope and Gary Cooper, came to actually help with the encouragement of the veterans that were now at the hospital.”

The hospital was closed permanently in 1957, and in 1962 the property was donated to the state to use as a rehabilitation center for its Civil Addict Program. But in the 1980s, the facility began housing people convicted of felonies as well as those confined for drug rehabilitation due to statewide prison overcrowding.

In the years since the state has taken over the property, Bacon said the historic buildings have fallen into a state of disrepair.

“Big picture, you know, for our region right now, it’s really underutilized and doesn’t generate a lot of economic benefit for our region, especially when you compare it to Blythe,” Grundmeyer said. “If they were to close that prison in Blythe, that city would be just decimated by that.”



The California Rehabilitation Center, as seen from Fifth Street in Norco, sits adjacent to a neighborhood and up the hill from a community park. (Alicia Ramirez/The Riverside Record)

The city of Norco has joined a coalition in calling on the state to close the California Rehabilitation Center instead of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.

That coalition also includes Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, state Sen. Kelly Seyarto, state Sen. Stephen Padilla, Supervisor V. Manuel Perez and the Riverside County Board of Supervisors as a whole and the cities of Beaumont, Calimesa, Cathedral City, Corona, Hemet, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Palm Desert and Perris.

In addition to the under-utilization of the property, Grundmeyer noted that the estimated cost for maintenance and repairs for the California Rehabilitation Center was more than $1 billion, compared to an estimated $430 million for Chuckawalla Valley State Prison. Information from the Save Chuck campaign also shows that the cost per inmate per year is roughly $10,000 more at California Rehabilitation Center than Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.

Crecelius said the city has submitted more than 40 public records requests seeking clarity from CDCR on why Chuckawalla Valley State Prison was chosen over the California Rehabilitation Center.

“A number of those requests have been denied citing deliberative process,” she said. “All the denials have been related to information requested as to how Chuckawalla was selected, the criteria, you know, what formula did they use that made Chuckawalla rise to the top and they either don’t have it or they just refuse to provide it.”

In response to inquiries from *The Riverside Record*, CDCR Information Officer Alia Cruz said in an email that Chuckawalla Valley State Prison was chosen for a number of reasons.

> *“Chuckawalla Valley State Prison was selected for closure for a variety of factors including: cost to operate at the new reduced capacity; impact of closure on the workforce; housing needs for all populations; long-term investments in state-owned and operated correctional facilities; public safety and rehabilitation; and durability of the state’s solution to prison overcrowding as well as ensuring the housing and treatment needs of the incarcerated population are achieved including housing for ADA, intermediate medical care, and mental health treatment.”*

That same information can also be found on the department's page for frequently asked questions about the closure. *The Record* also has a public records request pending with CDCR that the department said it expected to make a determination for by June 2.

The information currently available from CDCR about the closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison has left those in Blythe scratching their heads.

"We're perplexed why it was chosen," Rodriguez, who retired from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department in 2017 after 30 years, said. "And that's why we're trying to convince the state that we have a win-win, so to speak, by swapping the closures of these two different prisons at the extreme ends of Riverside County, but within Riverside County."

"It doesn't seem like any thought, concern, compassion, nothing was given to the people," Cusick said. "I shake my head because it just doesn't make sense to me, and, you know, it's already done damage."

"I'm really surprised the state didn't, I'm gonna say, didn't do their homework," Mayor Joseph "Joey" DeConinck said. "I look at it, they haven't done their homework on this particular project."

"You have to imagine that [the governor's] decision — we'll call it his decision, because just like me, I'm always responsible for our college's decisions, he's responsible for the state decisions — they weren't based on common sense and logic," Wallace said. "They're probably based on political reasons, and so you can't change his mind by giving him all these facts and details, you know, data that say why this is not a great idea."



Palm trees in the background frame the road leading up to Chuckawalla Valley and Ironwood state prisons. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

Crecelius said the city of Blythe was working on getting an environmental impact study done to better understand how the closure will impact the community.

"Although we know it's going to impact us, we don't have that dollar amount," she said. "We know it's going to be in the millions."

Prison boom, prison bust

Chuckawalla Valley State Prison was built during what associate professor at Brown University John Eason refers to as the prison boom.

"Between 1970 and 2000, there were roughly 1,000 prisons built, and we tripled the number of facilities," he said. "That's what I refer to as the prison boom."

In his first book, *Big House on the Prairie*, Eason studied the rural community of Forrest City, Arkansas, to better understand the proliferation of state prisons in rural communities.

"So my perspective is quite unique," he said. "I am Black, and what the research I've conducted shows, this isn't my personal opinion, most places that got a prison during the boom, the peak of the boom was around 93-94, were rural communities. They were southern communities and they had larger percentages of Blacks and Latinos."

For the book, Eason moved his family to Forrest City and spent months conducting interviews and research. What he found was that there are "broader, seemingly universal, forces that predict a bid for prison placement."

Eason wrote that to have an understanding of why communities advocate to have a prison built in their city requires an understanding of multiple levels of stigma and a sensitivity to rural disadvantage.

"Prisons represent different things to different people," he wrote. "Some see suffering and stigma, while others, especially communities that have seen better days, envision economic development opportunities and jobs. These conflicting views manifest a dynamic tension at the community level."

This was true for Forrest City, it was true for Blythe, and it was true for Susanville, a community that recently lost the fight to keep its prison, the California Correctional Center, open.



A large wooden sign lets drivers know they have arrived at the site of Chuckawalla Valley and Ironwood state prisons. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

"Susanville filed a lawsuit against the state, and they got an injunction to delay the closure of their prison," Crecelius said. "But while that lawsuit was going through, the state changed the rules, they actually changed the penal code and took away the city's ability to file a legal challenge."

The change in the law, coupled with the history the city has with hiring public relations firms to advocate at the state level, helped inform the city's approach.

"Maybe we need a different voice to work with the governor instead of pushing him into a corner, because we know that's not going to go over so well with this governor," Crecelius said. "So we first went this route ... and then if that doesn't work, we will have to look at other options, but unfortunately, the government has kind of tied our hands a little bit after Susanville."

Eason, whose research for the Prison Proliferation Project is funded by the National Science Foundation, has been focusing his attention recently on the closure in Susanville, which CDCR announced will be completed by June 30.

Susanville, much like Blythe, has two state prisons operating adjacent to one another. Also like Blythe, the prison CDCR slated for closure in Susanville is the facility that houses the water and wastewater treatment plants for both of the city's prisons.

"That's the other thing they're doing that they think they're slick with," Eason said. "They're not really closing them, because they can't fully close. They're not curbing demand there at all by the haphazard way they're closing these two facilities."

Eason believes the announced closures in Susanville and Blythe might be part of a larger trend unfolding across the nation.

"The prison bust, which we're still trying to see how this shakes out, it's been, you know, a few states: California, Texas and New York," Eason said. "So just like the boom was concentrated in certain states, the bust is concentrated in certain states."

Eason said that since 2000, there have been more prisons closed than open across the country, something he called "almost a correction for overbuilding by some states," though he was quick to note that the states closing the most prisons tended not to be in the top five builders during the boom.



A sign leading up to the prisons reminds drivers that there is no filming or photography allowed on the property. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

And while Eason supports prison closures, he said the only way for it to be done responsibly in communities like Susanville and Blythe is to bring transformative justice into the communities to reduce harm to the people who live and work there.

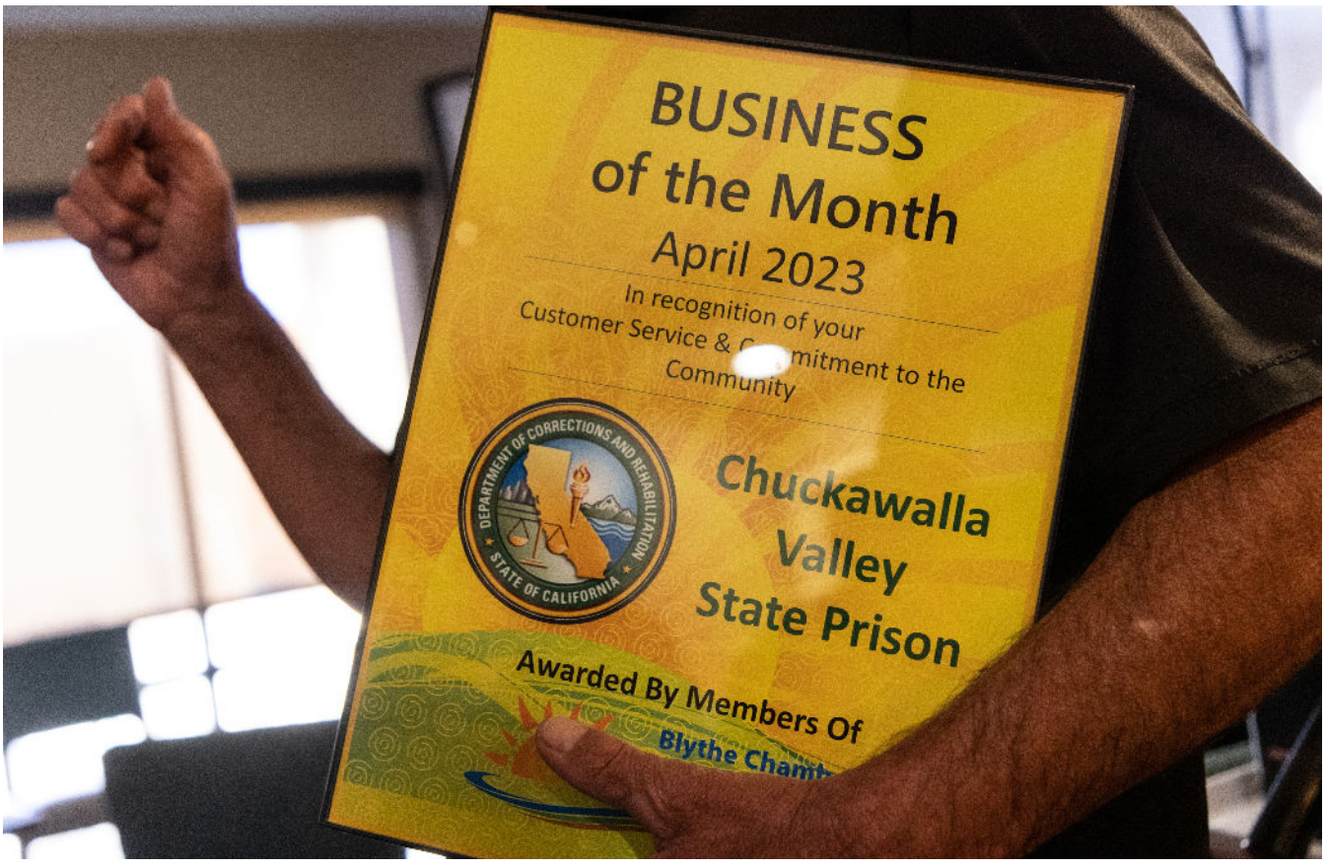
"If we're going to take an abolitionist approach to not just creating a prison bust, but responsibly closing prisons and reducing demand, we must center communities that are most affected by these closures," Eason said. "That means rural communities."

A community worth fighting for

Back at the Comfort Suites in April, Chuckawalla Valley State Prison community resource manager Kenny Kalian accepted the Business of the Month award on behalf of the prison.

"We do what we call inmate food sale fundraisers at the institution," he said. "That's where we sell a product, inmates pay more for the product out there, and that extra money goes back into the community."

Most recently, the prison donated more than $14,000 to the Blythe Cancer Resource Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of cancer care available in Blythe and the surrounding community. Over the last 35 years, the prison has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to organizations in the Blythe community, supporting everything from Blythe Little League to Toys for Tots.



Chuckawalla Valley State Prison was named April's Business of the Month by the Blythe Chamber of Commerce. Kenny Kalian, community resource manager, accepted the award. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

"We try to help everybody," he said. "And it's not just us, both institutions work real hard to do that, but one institution can't give what both of the institutions give."

Throughout *The Record*'s reporting on this story, the word community came up in almost every single conversation.

"The community pulls together like you wouldn't even believe," Angela Colangeli, who founded the organization Peace From Chaos after the death of her son, said. "If something happens, everybody will be the first to be right there to help you."

It's a sentiment echoed by Oscar and Shelly Soto.

"When you're in a community that is smaller, where people know people, when there's an emergency, when there's a crisis, the town pulls together," Shelly said. "You're not going to get that in a big community, because in a big community, you're nobody, you know what I mean?"

And while Shelly moved to Blythe in 1996, Oscar is a Blythe native. His parents opened Oscar's Stop and Shop when he was 8, a store his brother currently runs with occasional help from their 85-year-old mother, Lily.

"I always tell people, 'This is God's country, because you see tornadoes, you see floods and everything else,'" he said. "And I say, 'Look at us in Blythe. We got the river. We got the sand dunes. We got the desert. What more can you ask for?"

Oscar, who has worked for Chuckawalla Valley State Prison for 29 years, said if the prison closes, he'll work until it does and then retire. But he hopes it stays open for all of the other employees.



A sign in the window of a Blythe business reminds people to shop local. (Yannick Peterhans for The Riverside Record)

“They’re like family, all of them,” he said. “And I’d hate to see anybody lose their jobs, because I know a lot of them have kids and are established. They’re doing good here. It’s comfortable.”

For the people of Blythe, the fight for Chuckawalla Valley State Prison has always been about much more than a prison.

“It’s home,” Colangeli said. “Blythe is home.”

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