

Eye on Del Norte: County's Juvenile Hall is unsustainable. What's next?

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This past October, Del Norte's Chief Probation Officer, Lonnie Reyman submitted his annual report on the County's Juvenile Hall. The report is troubling, related to Supervisors and should be closed. Chief Reyman is 100 percent correct. Common sense tells one The Hall should be closed, expediently.

The Probation chief outlined the dire conditions affecting youth corrections which compelled him to present his sobering conclusion.

Chief Reyman cited three main reasons the Hall must be shuttered:

Juvenile Corrections staffing remains more than challenging if not impossible to maintain. Currently, with only six staff, Probation is 42 percent below minimum sufficiency standards.

The juvenile population in Del Norte County is at its lowest level in modern history. A decade back, the Hall served the needs of between 10 to 12 "at risk youth." Today, an average of three to four youths populate

Juvenile Hall. In 2018, juvenile arrests in Del Norte totaled 120. As 2022 sunsets. 61 juveniles have been arrested. Presently, there are two minors in custody, one soon to be released.

The costs for staffing a minimum 11 trained JCO employees for the limited population is untenable.

Del Norte's Juvenile Hall is out of compliance with the Board of State Corrections Commission, with near zero hope of meeting minimum standards under Title 15 of the California Code of Regulations. The BSCC has already visited Del Norte County recently and plans another to Juvenile Hall, before Spring, will no doubt act on Del Norte's inability to meet BSCC standards. The consequences are unavoidable.

The stress level on employees to maintain the Hall is oppressive and morale-depleting.

The Board of Supervisors apparently wants to study this dilemma. I hope the Board doesn't take too long to ponder the Hall's future. Supervisor Valerie Starkey, a retired deputy probation officer in Sonoma County seeks answers to staffing issues and related services to Del Norte "at risk" youth before she's prepared to pull the plug on the Hall. Supervisor Chris Howard talks about no ... "Magic Bullet to fix the Hall." Magic bullet? I'd suggest the Supervisor select a less obtrusive, destructive noun for "bullet" and perhaps supplant the word "pill." Candidly there is no "magical" anything to address the almost insurmountable challenges facing the Hall's future. The stark reality of building a magnificent facility barely two decades ago, and has now become obsolete because of California's misguided politics.

Not unlike the closing of Bar O Ranch north of Gasquet five years ago, legislators in Sacramento have selected ankle bracelets over positive and productive programs to implement corrective youth behavior. These new policies might save money but in the end, kids' welfare will be sacrificed. Tragic!

The idea has been floated to convert the Hall to a female custody detention center. The cost of converting this youth 602 Juvenile detention services building into an adult jail would be drastic, incredibly and realistically unaffordable. Staffing a new adult detention services building would be more than challenging in today's law enforcement employment marketplace. And the question of funding must be addressed.

There IS a golden lining to this dilemma. Chief Reyman hopes the Board will vacate the Hall and upon doing so, will release Del Norte County from onerous BSCC oversight as a 602 Youth Services detention center. For the very few offenders needing detention services, Del Norte should reach out to Humboldt or other neighboring counties requesting these services.

The Hall, with complete kitchen, two classrooms and basketball court, could be a wonderful site to offer behavior-changing programs and lots of them, not unlike the various programs offered at Pelican Bay State Prison. Chief Reyman's vision for youth corrections is not only achievable, it's the logical choice for the soon-to-be former Juvenile Hall.

Another very viable option for the Juvenile Hall's reason-to-be is State Senator Mike McGuire-sponsored CARE Court (Community Assistance, Recovery, Empowerment court,). With State-approved financing, the Hall could be an excellent option for those folks who find themselves homeless and afoul from the law. The remote Williams Drive location and close proximity to services is palpable.

Do your due diligence, expeditiously, supervisors. Close down the Hall and speak with Senate Majority Leader McGuire.

EYE ON DEL NORTE

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