

# Youth offenders out — adult inmates in

CYA camp neighbors fear losing 'safe' feeling



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

CYA ward James Francis sorts laundry at the Youth Conservation Camp in Ben Lomond. The youth facility will soon be replaced by a minimum security adult facility, mainly for low-level drug offenders and those convicted of theft.

## California Youth Authority Department of Corrections to arrive with 100 inmates

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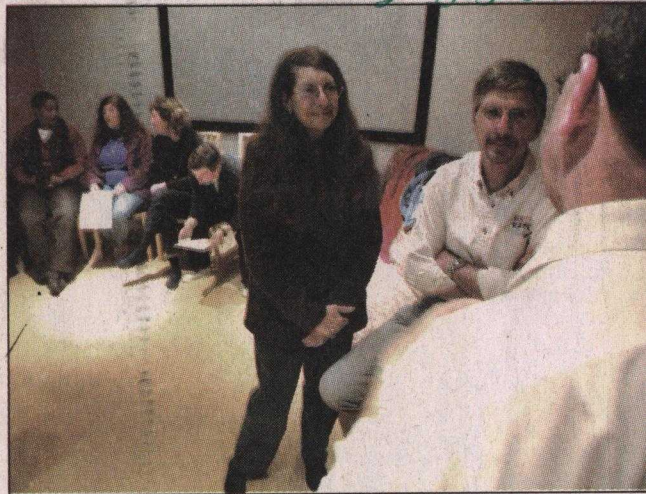
**BONNY DOON** — On a recent morning, amid the clatter and clang of stainless steel cookware and the sweet, eggy smell of French toast, wards were finishing up one of their last breakfasts in the nearly empty cafeteria at the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp.

Many of these young offenders said they were feeling somewhat uneasy not know-

ing where they would be serving the remainder of their sentences once the camp is officially handed over to its new steward, the California Department of Corrections, in the next few months.

Sometime before, the camp's remaining 27 men and boys, and 23 employees, will be relocated to other California Youth Authority facilities. Then, in early summer, a population of 100 adult inmates from the

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Ben Lomond camp neighbors Peggy and Ray Livingston express concerns at a recent community meeting.

*'It's all a matter of population. We can no longer fill camp beds.'*

PAM ERSKINE, CALIFORNIA YOUTH AUTHORITY



# Camp

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state prison system will move in.

"It's been dead time for the most part. Everyone's been waiting to go to the next place," said James Francis, describing the quiet atmosphere at the camp since January's closure announcement. "I've been here so long and now I got to adjust to a new place."

Francis is nearing the end of a three-year sentence for involuntary manslaughter for a drunken-driving accident that killed his best friend.

He said the camp's programs, including intensive training on a fire crew, had been an enriching experience overall.

"They really work with you (to) help you realize your problems. It's sad to see a place like this close," he said.

## Allaying the concerns

Just down the road, dozens of homeowners living near the 200-acre camp in rural Bonny Doon are also anxiously awaiting the changeover, many of them still unsure what the move will bring.

At a community meeting last week attended by about 30 local residents, the questions ranged from "How will prisoners be selected?" to "What if there's an escape?" to "Should we install a protective property gate at the entrance to the neighborhood?"

One of a handful of representatives involved in the transition and invited to discuss local concerns was Capt. John Peck of the state Department of Corrections.

He said the benefits of keeping the camp open far outweigh any risks. He said they are so minimal,

there's really nothing to fear.

"Granted, they're incarcerated inmates, they are felons, this is all true, but they are emergency workers," he said. "(The) community is going to be getting 100 extra emergency workers. If I tried to close these camps in other communities, they would fight me tooth and nail."

Peck assured residents that all inmates will be thoroughly screened, and that any felon with a prior or current conviction involving murder, arson, rape or pedophilia automatically would be excluded from the program.

By contrast, the CYA's camp programs do not preclude men charged with crimes involving murder or gang activity, as long as the offender has displayed he's on the path to reform, according to CYA camp Director Rudy Luna.

Most adult offenders in the state's 42 conservation camps are serving time for a host of drug-related or property crimes; the average stay is about eight months and is never to exceed five years, Peck said. Inmates who prove they're worthy of a minimum-security environment, the strict disciplinary regime, and the work-training programs are rewarded with a vastly reduced sentence, with every day served counting double, he said.

"It's a privilege for an inmate to be in a camp because the option is to go back to prison. If you're only doing eight months, what's the incentive to leave?" he asked rhetorically, adding there have been only a handful of escapes each year, out of a total state population of more than 4,000.

The number of CYA escapes or "walkaways" in 2004 was 22 out of several hundred wards, according to the youth authority.

"Don't forget we're law



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Ignacio Garcia whiles away the morning on his bunk listening to music, as he and the remaining handful of CYA wards at the Ben Lomond CYA Camp wait to be reassigned to a new location.

enforcers. We're not going to put the community at risk," Peck said.

## Still apprehensive

But despite such assurances, some Bonny Doon residents remain apprehensive.

Those concerned hope the "safe" feeling in their neighborhood, where people walk alone at night, where communal bicycles are left parked at the school bus stop, and where houses and cars are more often than not left unlocked, is not jeopardized.

"I leave my son home alone sometimes. I'm not going to do that anymore," said local resident Robin Gladstone. "These are

sophisticated adults. Are they just going to run down the mountain (if they escape) or are they going to steal my car? There's no guarantee, that's the bottom line for me."

Others worry that having a prison in their back yard will decrease property values.

"There are concerns on both sides of this issue," said county Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt. "This is a facility in the middle of a rural residential neighborhood, and it's a very open facility so obviously people who live there need to be reassured; on the other hand, having no one there wouldn't be good because people who are (at the camp) provide hand crews, and we really are dependent on that kind of help."

## Declining numbers

The Youth Authority population statewide has decreased from more than 10,000 wards 20 years ago to less than 3,500 today. As a result, three CYA institutions have closed, leaving eight in operation; now, with the imminent Ben Lomond closure, four of the CYA's six camps also have either closed or changed hands.

"It's all a matter of population. We can no longer fill camp beds," explained Pam Erskine, who oversees the camp program at the California Youth Authority.

She attributes the decline to lower juvenile crime rates, as well as legislative changes making it cost-

prohibitive to house less serious offenders with the state, thus encouraging a growth in the number and scope of county-sponsored youth detention programs. This vastly decreased the pool of eligible candidates for programs like the one offered at the local camp, Erskine said.

With the numbers plummeting, the last time the Youth Authority met its contractual obligation to the California Department of Forestry, the organization that owns and jointly operates the Ben Lomond camp, was in the early 1980s. Last year only a few dozen men were available for community projects and fire protection.

This has greatly affected the CDF's ability to man the cheap, productive fire crews that are essential both to the camp's operation and the fire protection needs of the community, said department spokesmen.

"We've seen a steady decline in our ability to service our public service projects," said Bill Ruskin, CDF supervisor at the camp.

Specifically, the number of projects has been cut in half and fire protection has been reduced by 30 percent. Additionally, CDF has grants, like one to help local homeowners with brush clearing, that it hasn't been able to fulfill for lack of manpower, Ruskin said.

"The inmates are paid \$1 a day to do projects and \$1 an hour fighting fires," he said. "You can see it's a fairly inexpensive labor force when you compare it to anything else."

*A community meeting to further discuss the camp conversion is scheduled for March 9 at the Bonny Doon School. For more information go to [www.bonnydoon.net](http://www.bonnydoon.net).*

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