

Meeting on CYA camp set

By MARIA GAURA
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A flood of protest over plans to close the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp — and four other youth camps statewide — has apparently convinced the California Youth Authority to reconsider its plans.

In an abrupt change of direction, Youth Authority officials now say they may close only two of the minimum-security camps for youthful offenders. Before the agency's plans were leaked to the public three weeks ago, CYA officials planned to close all five youth camps and turn them over to the Department of Corrections to house adult felons.

Santa Cruz County residents will have a chance to discuss the future of the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp with Youth Authority Chief Deputy Director Frank Alarcon and Assemblyman Sam Farr at a public meeting set for 11 a.m. Friday in Room 100 of the County Building, 701 Ocean Street.

The Youth Authority hoped the camp closures would help it meet a 3 percent cut in the agency budget this year. Critics say the camps are CYA's most effective program, and say the agency is abandoning its mandate to rehabilitate young offenders.

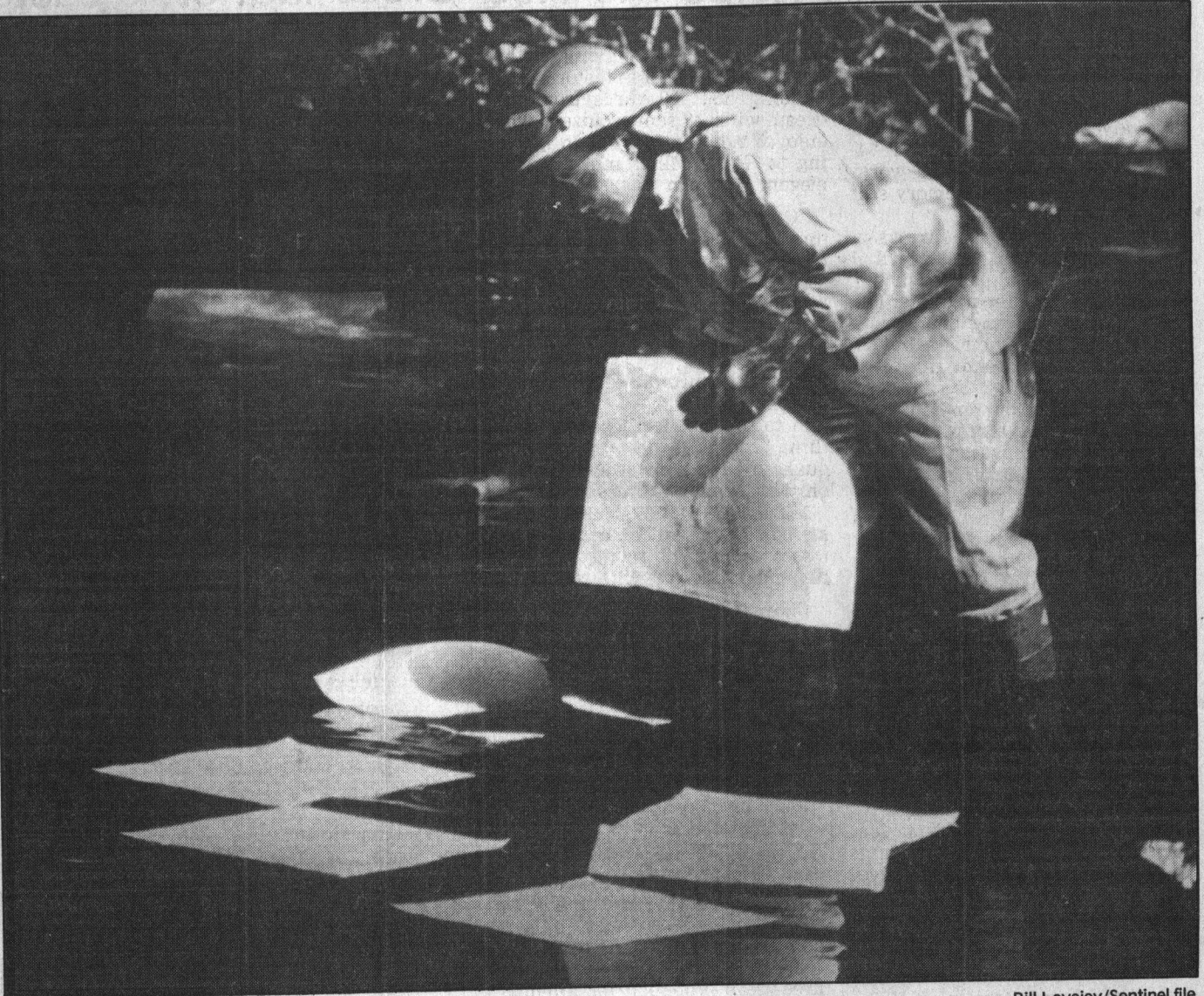
News of the closure plans sparked angry protests in the host counties. In Santa Cruz County, protest has come from the Board of Supervisors, Farr, judges, parole officials, law enforcement officials, community groups and private citizens.

Some protesters simply don't want adult felons in their towns, but the majority say the camps are society's best chance to salvage young offenders and they want them to stay.

If the camps are closed, more than 500 juvenile wards will be moved into locked facilities that critics say offer minimal training and rehabilitation and are dangerously overcrowded. The camps offer hard work, job training, academic training and drug counselling in exchange for a relatively free atmosphere.

The wards also provide fire protection and numerous community services.

In a Tuesday meeting before the Amador County Board of Supervisors, Youth Authority Director Cal Terhune



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel file

One of the California Youth Conservation Camp workers' chores was to help clean up a gas spill.

said the agency is now considering closing only two or three of the camps, said Amador County analyst Catherine Giannini. The announcement was the first public indication that community protest has hit its mark.

"He (Terhune) told them that they were reviewing the options and there was a possibility they could keep two or three of the camps open," Giannini said. "He said the Pine Grove Camp (located in Amador) could be one of the the ones kept open."

Amador activists feel it's significant that Terhune's announcement was made there, because the protest has been the loudest and angriest in that community. The Pine Grove Youth Conservation Camp is located right in the middle of Ginger Rolf's rural neighborhood, and Rolf said she and her neighbors will fight to keep it there.

Rolf's group has been meeting twice a week and has organized a letter-writing campaign, a protest on the steps of the Capitol, a yellow-ribbon campaign and meetings with CYA officials.

"It's truly a shame that in this day and age they have to consider cutting out the things that really work," Rolf said. "They seem to forget that these kids are people, and they have feelings, and some of them can truly be rehabilitated. This has got to be better than being in an institution where they're locked up all the time and they're not contributing to society."

Rolf thinks the camps in the most vocal communities may be spared this time around, but will be even more vulnerable the next time budgets are cut.

"We feel afraid that next year they'll take more of (the camps)," she said. "It's such an injustice to the kids."

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— Catherine Giannini,
Amador County analyst