

Juvenile Hall changes sought

Juvenile Hall
By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**

Sentinel staff writer

2-24-99

SANTA CRUZ — Judges, police chiefs, probation officials and community activists lined up Tuesday to register their opinions on a proposal to expand Juvenile Hall.

But it may be Jake Robinson, a teen alcoholic and drug addict, and the late Tyler McClellan, a heroin addict, who ultimately have as much influence.

Theirs were among the stories the county Board of Supervisors heard Tuesday in a day-long hearing to decide whether the county should apply for federal and state grants to expand and renovate the 30-year-old hall.

The supervisors put off a decision on the proposed \$5.2 million expansion for one week until they can get more information on operating costs.

But they moved forward with tentative plans for two new treatment programs to help teens like McClellan and Robinson.

One would be a publicly subsidized residential drug-treatment program for teens. The other would provide "day reporting" centers in North and South County for high-risk, multiple offenders. The centers would provide supervision and drug treatment for an estimated 72 teens a year, theoretically reducing the number of offenders confined to Juvenile Hall.

McClellan, a 15-year old heroin addict who died of an overdose last year, is the driving force behind efforts to establish a \$955,000 residential drug treatment program for teens. The county's cost would be \$177,000.

McClellan's parents told supervisors their son died even as they tried in vain to get him help. "There wasn't anything we could afford," Tom McClellan said. The only programs available were private and very expensive, he said.

In desperation, the McClellans had Tyler arrested so he get access to treatment programs available to kids in the juvenile justice system, Jackie McClellan said. Tyler died three months after being introduced to heroin, she said.

Since Tyler's death, the McClellans have established the Society Against Drugs organization and have worked to establish a publicly funded residential drug treatment program in the county that would serve teens. On Tuesday, they pledged \$20,000 toward the cost.

"I'm not sure why it was Tyler, but it may have been the reason for Tyler dying," Tom McClellan said. "It made a lot of people stand up and notice what was going on."

Much of the debate Tuesday centered on whether teens would be better served by more beds at Juvenile Hall or more beds at drug-treatment facilities.

Robinson argued for drug treatment. Robinson, 17, estimated that since he was 12 he'd been in Juvenile Hall "25 to 30 times" for a variety of offenses related to his alcohol and drug addiction.

"I knew I had a problem with drugs and alcohol. I was hoping to get help," but it was never offered, he said. "I wish it had been."

Proponents of an 18-bed expansion pointed to the hall's crowded facilities, where offenders double up in rooms meant for one, and sleep on mattresses on the floor. Juvenile Court Judge Kathleen Akao warned that the situation was "unconstitutional."

Sheriff Mark Tracy said law enforcement officials are working to keep the number of offenders incarcerated down by giving them citations or diverting them into other programs. But the number of serious crimes committed by teens, coupled with a higher juvenile population, have combined to overcrowd the hall, he said.

Probation officials contend the county should take advantage of federal and state grants to pay \$4.5 million of the \$5.2 million renovation and expansion costs.

One of the strongest advocates for the expansion and renovation was newly appointed District Attorney Ron Ruiz.