

Grand jury seeks Juvenile Hall makeover

Study says too many inmates, too little space

By INGA MILLER

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SANTA CRUZ — No one expects conditions at Juvenile Hall to be luxurious, but concern is mounting as more inmates are forced into tighter and tighter spaces. As conditions continue to deteriorate, officials and local residents are pressing for change.

"When you have just a one-room health facility, that's not just bad, it's against the law," said Thomas Sprague, foreman of the county's civil grand jury.

Juvenile Hall, which houses youth offenders from around the county, has been an ever-growing focus of the grand jury since 1996. In a recent report, jurors outlined what they saw as major problems at the Felton facility and suggested the county apply for state and federal renovation funds now available.

Officials are doing just that.

"A number of kids are sleeping on the floor," said John Rhoads, county chief of probation. "Conditions of confinement are not acceptable."

The proposal suggests the county apply for \$5 million from the \$179 million cash pool. A \$1 million match would be required of the county, but could be paid over a five-year period.

"We're obviously not in compliance with state standards on a number of issues," Rhoads said. He noted inadequate recreational space and the need for a better medical facility.

The hall's examination room is part of the same room where records are stored and nurses work. That is particularly troublesome considering the detained population's severe substance-abuse problem, jurors found. A separate report on the substance-abuse problem will be released by the jury next week.

Juvenile Hall currently houses 56 inmates, 14 more than its design capacity. That forces some inmates to double up in rooms built for one person. Other problems cited in the report were:

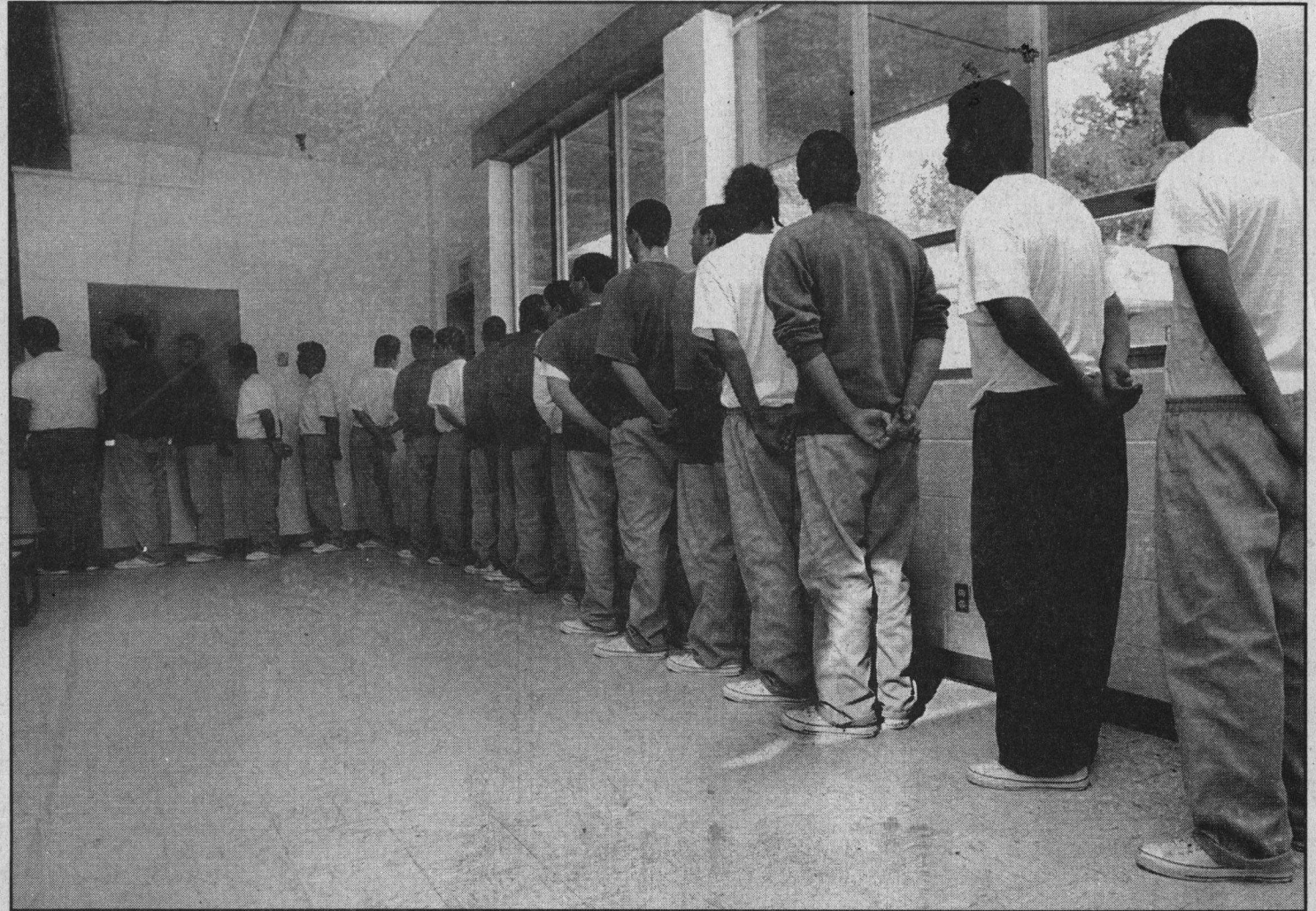
- inadequate segregation of inmates of different sex, age and offense;
- lack of proper educational space;
- poor health facilities;
- a serious asbestos problem.

A Juvenile Hall task force will not release its own findings on conditions at the facility for another two weeks, but Rhoads said that considering the task force produced a 39-point recommendation in 1996, there's little doubt the report will indicate a need for change.

"We're certainly recommending that we compete for grant funds because there is definitely a need here," Rhoads said.

The facility was built in 1974 when the county's population was about 140,000 — it's now at 250,000. Recent talk has circulated about building an additional facility in South County. The grand jury, however, concluded that would be too costly and wouldn't yield results for at least 10 years.

"That's too late," Sprague said. "Conditions need to improve now."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file photo

Inmates at Juvenile Hall line up for lunch at the Felton facility. The county civil grand jury is recommending a major renovation, citing inadequate medical facilities and recreational space.