

Juvenile Hall proposals spark bitter debate

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CAPITOLA — Members of the community, courts system, corrections, and law enforcement gathered at the Capitola Community Center Wednesday evening to bitterly debate the proposed expansion of the Santa Cruz County Juvenile Hall before the issue is visited by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

The forum, sponsored by the Latino Strategic Planning Collaborative

and the Latino Affairs Commission, included two panels moderated by Dr. Larry Trujillo of UC-Santa Cruz. The panel in favor of securing a renovation and expansion grant from the Board of Corrections included Chief Probation Officer John P. Rhoads, Juvenile Hall Administrator and Division Director Judy Cox, and Jim Rapoza, Juvenile Hall division director.

Rhoads, who called the hall's rehabilitation process a "slow and

ponderous journey," brought the audience up to speed on the problems faced by the 30-year old facility. "We have had continuous overcrowding over the last four to five years," he said, noting that on the average 57 kids a day are staying in a building with only 42 beds.

A renovation of the hall would provide medical facilities, recreation areas, mental health interview rooms, and increase the bed count to 60. The two current units would be split into

four, providing separate living quarters for girls and separate areas for violent offenders, who often end up being referred to the California Youth Authority or state prison.

"Currently, we are out of compliance with Title 15 on medical facilities," said Rapoza. "We need a separate examination room." He said kids have also been forced to sleep on the floor due to a lack of beds.

Rapoza said the renovated juvenile hall would feature increased

security that would better protect those housed there.

The Board of Corrections grant would be \$4,562,593, which would have to be matched by \$716,721 in county funds to complete the project.

The panel opposing the project consisted of Karen Delaney, executive director of the Volunteer Center, private consultant Marcia Galardo-Rincon, and Blanca Tavera of Matrix Consulting.

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Delaney, who was appointed by the board of supervisors 13 years ago to study prison issues, questioned the proposal on the basis of whether or not many children in juvenile hall belonged there or in drug treatment programs.

Delaney cited statistics that said cases of white juveniles were dismissed twice as often as those of Latino youth and that Latinos were disproportionately represented in juvenile hall, and accused the criminal justice system of "institutional racism."

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina angrily denied the allegation. "The allegation of institutional racism in the administration of the juvenile justice system was an error in 1996

and is an error now," he said. "If one accepted that hypothesis, one would have to assume that the reporting party dialing 911, the dispatcher, the police officer responding, the district attorney, the probation officer who files the case, the deputy district attorney who prosecutes the case, the public defender, and the judge would all be involved in a conspiracy against Latino youth. That's absolutely ridiculous."

Tavera said that juvenile crime was "a cry for help," and advocated that the money for more beds be spent on drug treatment instead.

Rhoads indicated that the juvenile justice system has already taken strides to secure drug treatment for youths in trouble. "We know there is a need for more drug treatment," he said, noting that a six-day-a-week program was being implemented for juveniles on probation, which would include drug testing

two times a week. Rhodes said that steps are also being taken to secure 12 beds in a treatment facility that would accept parents' MediCal insurance and would be supervised by a probation officer at no additional cost to the county.

"We recognize the problem and are willing to move toward solutions," he said, "but it won't happen overnight."

Medina said that Watsonville police are involved in several prevention programs, and advocated the juvenile hall improvements "not only on behalf of those housed, but for the families, victims, and public in general."

"We're all in the prevention business in one way or another," said Santa Cruz Police Chief Steve Belcher. He recommended that the beds be added to the hall, in the fear that "somebody's gonna slap a lawsuit on the place."