

CYA CAMP may be spared

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SANTA CRUZ — A top California Youth Authority official said Friday he thought the Ben Lomond Youth Conservation Camp could be kept open.

Frank Alarcon, chief deputy director of the CYA, said debate on the possible closure of the Ben Lomond camp — and four other Youth Authority detention camps statewide — has caught the attention of Gov. George Deukmejian, who is now personally reviewing the proposal. A decision could be announced as soon as next week, he said.

One option now being considered would be closing only two of the camps, and if that option is chosen "Ben Lomond is very, very high on the list of camps to save," Alarcon said. "If I had to bet, I'd bet we can retain Ben Lomond."

Alarcon made the announcement at a public meeting held in the county courthouse. The Youth Authority is considering closing its camps in response to a 3-percent budget cut this year, and may turn the camps over to the Department of Corrections to house adult felons. The plan has proved unpopular in CYA host communities across the state.

"I wish I could tell you definitely what is going to happen," Alarcon said Friday. "I thought I would have an answer today ... but the governor himself is personally reviewing the issue, due to the efforts of many of you in this room."

More than 60 people showed up for Friday's meeting, forcing county employees to scramble to find a meeting room big enough for the crowd. The group ended up in a vacant courtroom with Alarcon, Assemblyman Sam Farr, Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Robley Levy and other CYA officials sitting solemnly behind the bar.

The crowd unanimously opposed closing the camps, and nearly two dozen people gave testimony asking Alarcon to keep the camps open. Some speakers were state and county employees who had

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taken the day off to testify, others were volunteers who work with the Ben Lomond wards, and others lived near the camp.

Sen. Henry Mello, Supervisors Fred Keeley and Jan Beautz and Judge Bill Kelsay sent representatives or messages opposing the plan.

Linda Erwood, chief probation officer for the county, opposed closing any of the conservation camps, saying it removes a valuable option from the juvenile justice system. The governor slashed half of the state's budget for county-run juvenile detention camps this year, she said, meaning that more young offenders will go directly to the CYA for incarceration.

"We foresee closing of camps at the county level ... and now to take the (CYA) camp option away will be an impossible situation," she said. "All that will be left is to skip the progressive steps and send them directly to an institution."

The CYA has about 8,000 youths in its custody, with approximately 500 housed in camps and 100 at the Ben Lomond camp.

Mike Burns, president of the Felton Business Association, said cutting the camps and their rehabilitation programs would be fiscally irresponsible.

"This will just shift the burden to the Department of Corrections and increase recidivism in the juvenile justice system," he said. "A 3-percent cut like this will come back and revisit us tenfold in coming years."

Many speakers applauded the

thousands of hours of public service the wards perform, especially following the landslides, earthquakes and floods Santa Cruz has suffered in recent years.

Others broke into tears as they testified, and pleaded with Alarcon to reconsider the cuts.

Alarcon was visibly touched by the testimony, but said the agency is in a terrible financial predicament and is running out of places to cut expenses. This year's cut will amount to about \$8.9 million.

"This isn't the first cut we've had to absorb," he said. "We've had to take 2 and 3 percent cuts for nine or 10 years now. Next year we'll probably lose another 2.5 percent. The last \$10 million cut reduced our supervision in every facility everywhere in the state."

The camps have been mostly spared until now, he said. The agency lost its sixth camp earlier this year when it was taken over by the Department of Corrections. The Youth Authority is overcrowded now, and closing the camps will make the crowding worse, Alarcon said.

"I'd be lying to you if I didn't say that things are going to get worse," he said. "In five years we're going to be faced with the largest group of youth we've had since the baby boom ... and the fact is it's easier and cheaper to overcrowd an institution (than a camp)."

Farr pledged the community's support if the CYA keeps the Ben Lomond camp open.

"In tough times this county knows how to pull together, and we'll pull together to keep this camp going," he said.