

Grand jury: Sacramento County wastes \$2 million annually on closed juvenile facilities

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The Sacramento County grand jury has accused the county Probation Department of wasting approximately \$2 million annually to maintain two shuttered juvenile facilities while failing to provide long-term residential treatment programs for troubled youths.

In its final report issued June 28, the 2013-14 grand jury recommends that the county lease or sell the Boys Ranch property near Rancho Murieta and consider reopening the Warren E. Thornton Youth Center, near the county's juvenile hall in the Rosemont area. The youth center was closed in 2009 and the Boys Ranch in 2010 due to county budget cuts.

Prompted by a complaint questioning why the county was spending \$1 million a year on the closed Boys Ranch facility, the grand jury investigated and found that the county also was spending money to maintain the closed youth center.

"No county official provided exact amounts being spent, but documents examined by the grand jury showed that since their closure, the combined maintenance costs of the youth center and Boys Ranch totaled over \$2 million annually," the report states.

With the closure of these facilities, the report says, the Sacramento County Juvenile Court lost resources and facilities to house and treat long-term offenders.

Youths who had resided in those facilities were returned to juvenile hall, placed on formal probation, assigned to home detention or released, the report says.

County officials, who have 90 days to formally respond to the grand jury, declined to comment last week on the findings, saying they had not had time to review the details of the report.

"In fairness to the process, we're not even a week away from getting this report," said Mike Shores, assistant chief probation officer. "It will take some time for us as an organization to sit down and look at those recommendations."

Shores said the Probation Department argued against closure of each of the facilities.

For 50 years, the courts had sentenced some the area's most troubled youths to the Boys Ranch, a 150-acre fenced compound north of Rancho Murieta. There the boys, mostly 15 to 17 years old, took academic and vocational classes, and received therapy and substance abuse treatment.

The youth center housed younger offenders, typically boys ages 13 to 16, and girls up to 18 years old, who posed less of a public safety risk than those assigned to the Boys Ranch. At the youth center, they received treatment for mental health, anger management and drug addiction, and also attended school.

County officials told the grand jury that the expenses associated with the closed facilities were largely due to debt service on improvements made at the Boys Ranch shortly before its closure, including "a million dollar fence," according to the report.

"The county's own documents proved this claim was inaccurate," the report says. "In addition to debt service, the documents showed substantial additional expenses for maintenance, necessary to keep the property from deteriorating and thereby supposedly decreasing in value. But in fact, the same documents reveal that the property is more valuable as virgin land, without the current aging structures and facilities."

The county in 2011 sought lease proposals for the Boys Ranch property. Although there were interested applicants, the short, five-year lease term likely discouraged tenants given the necessary startup costs and capital outlay, the report says. The grand jury noted that the county in March of this year issued a new request for proposals for the property, without the five-year term, but advising that because the facility has been partially financed with tax-exempt bonds, use by a state or local governmental entity may be given preference.

The grand jury suggests that the county would be best served by rezoning the Boys Ranch property from agricultural use, possibly to residential or commercial use, to "maximize the property's value, whether from a lease or sales standpoint."

Michael Morse, the county's director of general services, was among the people the grand jury interviewed. The county has received proposals for use of the Boys Ranch property in response to its March solicitation, but Morse said he could not discuss them at this time. Sale of the property is an option, he said.

In addition to the cost of maintaining the closed facilities, the grand jury expressed concern about the lack of services for the county's troubled youths. Facilities and programs for teens needing long-term treatment in Sacramento County are limited or nonexistent, the report states. The grand jury recommends that the county Board of Supervisors appoint a task force to assess the viability of establishing a commitment program at the youth center to meet that need.

“Evidence suggests that a phased commitment program would serve Sacramento County, the Juvenile Court and the community well by allowing youths to receive services based on their needs while ensuring community safety through sound interventions created to curb recidivism, educate and ultimately change the lives of youths,” the report states.

Since the youth center and Boys Ranch closed, the county’s juvenile population has evolved, Shores said.

“We need to look at the juvenile population and look at the system needs,” he said.

Shores noted that county’s 2014-15 budget does not include funding to reopen the youth center.

“If there’s any discussion about programmatic creation or change,” he said, “we have to do it within the county’s fiscal limits and do it smart ... making sure we are providing good service to the community.”

He said the department will undertake that analysis during the next 90 days as it prepares its response to the grand jury.

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