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EDITORIAL

Juvenile facility closes

State officials announced last week they will close the Northeast Indiana Juvenile Correctional Facility off Cook Road at the end of May. Here are the answers to some questions about the closing.

Q. Isn't the juvenile center on Wells Street?

A. Many local residents not involved with the juvenile justice system don't know about the state Juvenile Correctional facility, which was downtown on Washington Boulevard until 2001.

The facility is the juvenile system's equivalent to a medium-security state prison, where juveniles serve longer sentences. State government's Department of Correction operates the facility.

The Wells Street building is the better-known Juvenile Justice Center, the county-run facility formerly known as Wood Youth Center. It is the juvenile equivalent of an adult jail, where youths are taken after being detained, held until hearings or trials and serve shorter sentences of up to 120 days. County government's Allen Superior Court operates that center, which the county commissioners own.

Q. Any other differences?

A. The youths held in the state facility tend to be, for lack of a better term, more hard-core. They either have committed a more heinous crime or have a record that places them beyond the scope of local juvenile authorities.

Q. Why is the state closing the center?

A. Officials claim the state doesn't need it anymore, that the population has dropped from more than 100 to about 45 and that more offenders are placed on community programs. Less than four years ago, however, the city Board of Zoning Appeals gave the building's owner permission to expand its capacity by 30 percent, from 100 to 130 juveniles.

Undoubtedly, given the state's finances, saving money is a factor. The center employs 60 workers and pays \$50,000 a month for rent, spending \$4 million a year.

Q. Why did the state have a center here in the first place?

A. The idea of regional centers was to place juveniles in age-appropriate "prisons" not too far from their homes. But as juvenile placement and programs become more specialized, only three juveniles that went through Allen County courts remain at the state facility. The remaining juveniles not released before the May 29 closing will be moved to the state's juvenile center in South Bend.

Q. What will happen to the building?

A. The closing announcement was sudden and no plans have been made. A state spokesman said the lease payments would end after this month. The building permit issued in 1999 listed the expected cost of the structure at \$2.8 million.

The dormitory-style building might be an acceptable location for local efforts to house returning adult felony offenders participating in the innovative Re-Entry Court. Housing is the biggest obstacle for returning offenders, and it appears the plans to house them in the old Holiday Inn Northwest, most recently a Quality Inn, have fallen through.



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