

Our View: Juvenile center in Bunkie will offer a second chance

11:00 PM, Jul. 19, 2011

Editorial Board - The Town Talk

Word that the state of Louisiana will build a facility for juvenile offenders near Bunkie is comparatively welcome news. It acknowledges the heavy lifting done by locals to secure the project, and it tracks with the state's efforts to rehabilitate young people in trouble.

The state Office of Juvenile Justice decided to build the \$20 million secure-care center in Bunkie because the small city stepped up in a big way: Bunkie will donate a 20-acre site to the state, spend \$1.5 million to improve the location and work with the office to ensure there are sufficiently qualified applicants to fill some 85 full-time positions.

Because of its location, St. Landry Parish was the office's first choice for the center, proposed in August 2008 to house eligible juveniles from Southwest and Central Louisiana. After two years of resistance from residents in St. Landry, the state opted to look elsewhere.

With that, Bunkie assured officials it would welcome the facility.

Speaking to that Monday, OJJ Deputy Secretary Mary L. Livers said, "There was great public support" in Bunkie.

That was due to efforts by Mayor Mike Robertson and others who distributed fliers, held public meetings and spoke to individual homeowners about what the center hoped to do and what it could mean to the local economy.

"It's a win-win," the mayor said.

When it opens in two to three years, the center will become part of Louisiana's commitment to improving the ways in which it works with juveniles.

It hasn't been that long since the state was involved in court and regulatory actions because it did not provide adequate protection for incarcerated juveniles.

During the 1990s, the state was plagued with related problems: inconsistent sentencing by judges, warehousing of offenders, high recidivism, increasing numbers of young people in the adult system, and the nation's highest juvenile incarceration rate.

When the Bunkie facility opens, it will join four others in the state -- three for males and one for females. The office calls these high-security centers "for those youth deemed by a judge or by OJJ to be a risk to public safety and/or not amenable to treatment in a less restrictive setting."

Eligible juveniles, while closely monitored, have access to restorative justice programs, vocational training and on-site medical, dental and mental health treatment. They have a chance. They also have to toe the line, or face losing the privilege of being there.

We applaud Bunkie and Avoyelles Parish for making a thoughtful decision, and we hope the center succeeds in its important mission.

With diligence and luck, it will become known as a place that grooms productive citizens.

Opelousas, LA – Daily World Juvenile jail is one more lost opportunity

11:00 PM, Jul. 19, 2011 |

Citizens of St. Landry Parish are experiencing a bit of déjà vu, whether they know it or not.

The Regional Therapeutic Facility for Youthful Offenders will be built in the Avoyelles Parish town of Bunkie — not at any one of at least five proposed locations in St. Landry Parish.

The reason: Adamant opposition on the part of residents near each site.

The same scene, with different principals, played out, more or less, at least twice before.

At the turn of the last century, local officials opposed the notion of locating the new Southwestern Louisiana Industrial Institute here. It went, instead, to Lafayette, where, after a couple of incarnations, it became the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Since those days, it has attracted students and their parents' money from all over the world.

Roughly 50 years later, another upstart venture sought to locate itself in Opelousas.

But there was a fear that the local culture would suffer from the influx of outsiders. And some local business leaders worried about competition.

So, the Oil Center went to Lafayette and became a driving force in its economy.

And now, another potential source of income has been turned away, in spite of the efforts of supporters like state Sen. Elbert Lee Guillory-D, Opelousas, Sheriff Bobby Guidroz, Parish President Don Menard and others.

St. Landry Parish, to speak bluntly, is poor.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the median household income here was \$32,877, compared to the median household income for all of Louisiana of \$42,460.

In Lafayette, which embraced those undesirable elements in the last century, the median household income, according to the 2010 census, was \$47,901.

In this parish, 25.3 percent of families live below the poverty level, compared to 17.6 percent for the whole state.

St. Landry Parish had been the Office of Juvenile Justice's first choice for the facility. But the cries of "not in my back yard," convinced them to look elsewhere.

Residents cited a number of reasons.

One was increased traffic — and it's understandable that residents in rural areas might not want more traffic up and down country roads.

Another was security. They worried about the possibility of escapes — although there are two jails in the downtown area, which doesn't seem to worry local businesses and residents too much.

The loss of the juvenile detention center represents not only the loss of \$28 million in construction costs or the approximately \$5 million in annual payroll for about 90 employees.

It also represents the loss of all the money it will take to maintain the facility — much of which would have gone to local businesses.

St. Landry Parish has a long history of turning down propositions that could bring dollars into local pockets. The next time an opportunity comes along, it may be wise to remember the lessons of the past.

DaSleepingGiant

5:08 AM on July 20, 2011

While it is bad or St. Landry to have lost jobs, this Club Med for future urban warriors and future hip hop millionaires is a very very bad ideas. These thugs need incarceration, not Sandals-Bunkie.

opelousasmanman

6:06 AM on July 20, 2011

the reason the median income in st landry is so low is due to the fact that a large portion of the residents would prefer government assistance in lieu of bettering themselves.

If I had to guess, 60-75% of the residents inside the city limits of opelousas receive some form of government assistance.