

County Administrator's Update

ISLE CARES



August 2018

We Promise to Keep You Well-Informed About the Proposed Juvenile Detention Center.

As County Administrator, I fully understand the importance of ensuring the physical safety and economic well-being of the citizens of Isle of Wight County. Neither I, my staff, nor the Board of Supervisors would ever take an action that was not well considered and in our collective best interest. Such is the case with the juvenile detention center, also referred to as a juvenile development center or youth treatment center, that the Commonwealth of Virginia wishes to build in Isle of Wight County.

We learned of this project late last year and had some initial conversations in December 2017, but frankly, we did not know if it would be a reality until the Governor signed the State's budget in June 2018, approving funding for the design and construction of the project. Once County staff learned of the project, we discussed it with the Board of Supervisors and members of the Windsor Town Council and staff. In February 2018, we provided information to the media, which reported on the potential for the facility to come to our County. Additionally, I provided information about the potential project in the IsleCares newsletter. Could we have been more pro-active in our communications? Perhaps. Should there have been an immediate town hall meeting to lay out all the facts? That would have been premature in February and, in fact, it still is.

The Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and the Department of General Services (DGS) are looking, at our suggestion, primarily at property south of Windsor along Route 258 inside the undeveloped Phase 3 of the Shirley T. Holland Intermodal Park to determine if there is suitable acreage for this facility. One of our primary concerns is impact on wetlands. If the experts and the Army Corps of Engineers say the State can build, the selected site will likely be transferred from the County to the Commonwealth. Before that happens there will be public information sessions for you to ask and get answers to your questions and opportunities for you to give us your feedback as to whether this is a good or bad idea for Isle of Wight County.

Because the Board of Supervisors, the Windsor Town Council, and other County officials have had an opportunity to hear what DJJ plans, the County believes the 60-bed center will be a benefit to the County, the region and the State. The juvenile development center will employ 240 employees in a variety of jobs including teachers, therapists, administrators, food service staff, maintenance staff, security and more.

The occupants of the facility will generally be teens under 18 from the Hampton Roads area that have committed crimes, including serious felonies. Throughout Virginia and the nation, there are thousands of people, most much older, who reside in jails and prisons in urban and rural settings. It's a fact of life. We do not send convicted men, women, boys and girls to remote islands off the coast. Instead, we take appropriate precautions for the security of the public and the individuals within correctional facilities, and that is exactly what DJJ is doing.

As previously noted, among the 240 employees will be a number of well-trained security personnel. The facility itself will be secured by technologically enhanced fencing, similar to the kind that protects the CIA headquarters and other government and corporate structures that demand strict security. DJJ does not want anyone to escape, any more than we do. And DGS, which constructs Virginia's correctional institutions in partnership with experienced architects, engineers and contractors, is fully aware of their responsibility to the community.

The operational emphasis of the center will be on rehabilitation. Although not every teen that comes to the Center will be released fully rehabilitated, it behooves us all to try. Many of these youngsters come from tough neighborhoods and circumstances (including here in western Tidewater) where survival is their daily regimen. We do not want them on the street until they have grown up a bit, learned to manage their anger or fears and maybe picked up a vocational skill that they can use to support themselves or others when they leave. The proposed center will be a model for any future DJJ facility in Virginia, making family visitation and healing more likely.

The proposed facility will be away from neighborhoods and to a certain extent, out of sight because there will be a treed buffer. We will all know it's here because our family members and friends will work or volunteer there. There will be volunteer opportunities, as there are at Bon Air, for those of us with warm hearts to show these young people that Isle of Wight County CARES, in hopes it will positively impact their futures.

While we all wait for the environmental verdict, I pledge that we will keep you informed of what is occurring behind the scenes on our website, through the media and in other forums. I invite you to email me at admn@isleofwightus.net with any questions or concerns so my staff can address them with DJJ and DGS.

Randy R. Keaton, County Administrator
Isle of Wight County Virginia