

Residents split on faith-based teen center



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A local Christian couple announced Monday that they want to open what they called a "glorified foster home" for up to 40 troubled teens in the Bedell Flat area north of Reno.

A fiery public comment session ensued at the North Valley Citizen Advisory Board meeting with residents arguing for and against the Sierra Nevada Teen Ranch. More than 100 attended the meeting.

Ranch co-founder Marvin Neal said they plan to enroll teenagers who need homes and want to live in the Christian care community. Neal said teens who have committed felony offenses would not be allowed.

"We have talked to several family court judges who have said they could fill (the Sierra Nevada Teen Ranch) in a day if we were ready," he said.

Those against the proposal cited concerns about safety, passable roads, declining property values, no perimeter fence to keep teens on the property and a lack of the administrators' qualifications. Many said they wouldn't feel safe to continue leaving their doors unlocked and keys in their vehicles if the facility were built.

"Nobody can guarantee that a walk-away will not occur, and that could turn into something horrible," Red Rock resident Jim McGill said. "I don't care whether this facility is Christian, Buddhist or Martian."

Others said the Christian teen ranch, located two miles from the nearest home, would provide necessary services to help meet the needs of homeless and troubled teens.

"It's the spirit of fear that's breaking apart this room," Stead resident Shawn Lady said. "You are making these children, who need help, into absolute monsters ... If you don't help these kids, you'll be paying for them in prison."

Red Rock resident Patti Reslock said this kind of project is allowable on land zoned general rural.

"(The county) cannot deny (your project) based on fear," Reslock said in favor of the project. "What may or may not happen is no reason to deny it."

Others said the remote location of the ranch could be a liability to its occupants' safety. Pete Hackbach, speaking on behalf of the Sierra Rancho Housing Association, said deaths have occurred in the remote area because of delayed police and paramedic response times.

Hackbach said residents in the area all have been stranded in their homes for three and four days during bad winter weather. If an emergency were to occur at the ranch, Hackbach said he didn't see how they could be evacuated.

Washoe County requirements will dictate the quality of the road, fire safety precautions and water access.

Co-founder Jan Neal said the dirt road to the site will be improved and a helipad will be installed in case of emergencies. They also are looking into snowmobiles and horse sleighs if the winter weather makes the roads impassable. Marvin Neal said they haven't decided what level of first-aid training the staff would have.

Marvin Neal said he doesn't have all of the qualifications needed for the facility, but plans to hire adequately trained staff or partner with other successful teen homes for training. He said he has never run a facility similar to the teen ranch but has worked as a juvenile detention facility chaplain.

Marvin Neal also said he once was on the same path as the kids he hopes to help.

"It's not blind faith," Jan Neal said. "There are enough of these programs up and running to see it can work."

While the program is not affiliated with a specific church, the Neals said the teen ranch is faith-based and they will teach according to the universal church of Jesus Christ. They said the program will be funded by a combination of private and church donations, grants and other programs.

"They have love and true concern for other people," Animal Ark co-founder Diana Hiibel said.

Hiibel said she has known the Neals for 10 years from their participation in the Sparks Christian Fellowship Church.

"Whatever project they take on, they give it their all," Hiible said. "(Marvin Neal) feels like he's being led by God to do this."

The Neals said they chose not to pursue a similar project in Warms Spring in 2003 because the neighbors were too close.

"I arrived with an open mind," Bedell Flat resident Bob Reaney said. "(But) we all had to pull this out of you ... It doesn't feel like it's been as well thought out as we would hope. That's why there's such a feeling of fear in this room."

North Valleys CAB Vice Chairman Glen Pedersen made the motion to forward the comments made by citizens to county officials rather than make a recommendation.

"There's too many unanswered questions here," Pedersen said. "Everything must be made available to the county for their consideration."

All voted in favor of the motion except North Valleys CAB member Jack Selin, who said he would rather have the board recommend denying the project since most residents spoke against the project.