

Public safety cannot be an afterthought

By Don Saylor and Jim Provenza

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As Yolo County supervisors, we are committed to public safety, cultivating new job opportunities and preserving our agriculture land.

Since 2011, we have served on a board subcommittee actively working with the federal Indian Health Service as it has sought to build a 40,000-square-foot Youth Regional Treatment Center on County Road 31 between Davis and Winters in Yolo County. This center would provide substance-abuse treatment services to Native American youths from throughout Northern California.

Providing culturally appropriate substance-abuse treatment to Native American youths is a cause we support. In fact, when other communities pushed this proposed center out of their jurisdiction, Yolo County stepped up to engage as a partner. We would be delighted to welcome this center to Yolo County if mitigation measures are in place to address the impacts it will have on traffic safety, flood control, agricultural lands and emergency access at this location.

There are several environmental challenges associated with this site. For example, in January 2017 the section of road in front of the proposed location was closed due to flooding. This would hinder emergency access to the facility. However, the most significant and unmitigated concern is the clear and present danger associated with access to the site from County Road 31.

The proposed center would host 32 residential treatment beds and employ about 70 staff. Staff, visitors, patients and vendors will enter the facility from a section of County Road 31 that is immediately adjacent to an S-curve in the road. At this location, cars are driving at high speeds with visibility constraints. Indian Health Service's own traffic study found that a left-turn lane and a right-turn deceleration lane are necessary to avoid collisions.

We were shocked to learn that the Indian Health Service has refused to build these critical road improvements as part of the project construction. Providing safe access to the project location is a customary element of any project, especially one designed to serve a public purpose.

We have explored many options to work with IHS to address this concern and appreciate the efforts of Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Congressman John Garamendi to encourage IHS to seek funding for this vital public safety measure. However, our efforts thus far have not resulted in action.

We were stunned to hear IHS' representatives state, in a public Yolo County Board of Supervisors meeting, that they had no plans for safe access to the Yolo County facility and were simply "optimistic" that they could address traffic concerns "in the future."

We visited a similar IHS treatment center in Southern California prior to its opening. Traveling to the facility, we missed the turn three times, finally noticing a hand-painted cardboard sign on a fence post next to what can best be described as a half-mile dirt farm path that connects the facility to the nearest road. Under severe weather conditions, this dirt path would create great challenges accessing the center.

Six months after our visit, the facility opened with no plans to build a road that could provide safe access to the facility. Based on this experience, we cannot rely on vague suggestions of potential future actions.

It is clear to all parties that, under current plans, this project location presents a public safety risk. We aren't willing to wait until after a facility opens in Yolo County to seek safety solutions to known problems. We should not plan based on body counts. Public safety cannot be an afterthought.

If this facility were proposed by anyone other than the federal government, the project would be sited in an area appropriate for such use, or in one of our cities. The federal government can proceed without considering our local land-use and environmental regulations, but it can't proceed in violation of federal National Environmental Protection Act requirements.

We can't in good conscience support this project under the current conditions. We have worked patiently for nearly seven years to address these issues to no avail. Therefore, the County of Yolo filed a lawsuit to prevent construction of this facility until safety hazards are fully addressed. We hope the federal government will change course and build adequate safety measures so we can jointly move forward to safely provide a valuable service in Yolo County for Native American youths.

— Don Saylor represents District 2 and Jim Provenza represents District 4 on the Yolo County Board of Supervisors. Both are Davis residents.