

# Rural Petaluma neighborhood fighting juvenile treatment center expansion

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One neighbor fears for her grandchildren's safety.

Others have expressed exasperation through years of noise and light from an adjacent basketball court.

And during the recent intractable drought, some have seen the wells at their rural Petaluma properties run dry.

After years of watching an upscale juvenile rehabilitation center snatch up million-dollar properties and convert them to inpatient care homes, neighbors are fighting back as that center - Muir Wood Adolescent and Family Services - seeks local permission to expand even further.

The expansion effort - from six beds to 10 at one home - faces its first public hearing at 1 p.m. Feb. 10 during a Sonoma County Board of Zoning Adjustments meeting, and one group of neighbors promises a heavy presence.

"Muir Wood wants to expand, but it is already a nuisance to the community and a burden to law enforcement," said Tobias Young, who lives near the center's two Skillman Lane locations, home to 16 youth patients. "The immediate neighbors are harassed with noise, lighting and traffic issues. Wells have run dry. Neighbors hundreds of feet away feel unsafe after runaways have been arrested on their property."

The push by neighbors to have the county reject this latest expansion effort – and revoke an existing expansion permit - comes as teen drug use has seen its greatest reduction since 1975, but also as teen mental health issues have escalated amid the coronavirus pandemic, according to surveys detailed by the National Institutes of Health and the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Those troubling mental health data, Muir Wood officials said, show why an expedited expansion of their operation is warranted - so that the facility can serve more young people and make a larger impact.

"I've been working with adolescents and families for 30-plus years - it's all I've done," Muir Wood founder Scott Sowle said in an interview Tuesday. "The last two to three years is really the worst I've ever seen it."

Headquartered in Petaluma, Muir Wood established its first facility, Skillman North, in 2012 at 1743 Skillman Lane. Boys ages 12-17 typically stay four to six weeks, participating in music therapy, onsite schooling and recreational activities while receiving treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues.

Since that first facility opened, Muir Wood has opened another seven homes in south Sonoma County, including four dedicated to helping young girls.

The treatment center's eight sites are speckled throughout southern Sonoma County, from the tree-lined passages of northwest Petaluma's Lorchman and Skillman lanes to the rolling hills Cold Springs Road wends through northeast of Penngrove. The soothing, rural environments are key to Muir Wood's approach, officials say.

"A significant amount of thought goes into our campus settings," according to a statement from Sowle on the organization's website. "For many of our clients, this may be their first exposure to treatment. For some, their first time away from home. When these boys and girls come to Muir Wood and walk through the doors of our beautiful, homelike campuses, these settings help them to initially engage in treatment and the process of healing."

But neighbors say with 198 emergency calls tied to the original Skillman Lane facility in the past 10 years, any plans for expansion are misguided - and would represent the further erosion of property values and neighborhood character in these far-flung, bucolic enclaves.

Neighbors, typically, would have no say in the business of a juvenile treatment facility like those offered by Muir Wood. California law allows those types of facilities to serve up to six clients at any residential site in the state. And there's little to prevent a company like Muir Wood, which runs nearly half of Sonoma County's youth residential treatment facilities, from buying up whole blocks of homes to expand their footprint.

Expansion requests, like the one filed by Muir Wood in 2014 and again this year, represent a rare opportunity for neighbors to make their voices heard.

Lauren Franco, whose property overlooks the Skillman Lane facilities, said she spent hours visiting dozens of neighbors and dropping off more than 80 letters related to the expansion request. Franco said she was hopeful Sonoma County officials would take neighbors' concerns into consideration.

"Obviously, we want these kids to get help. Nobody's heartless," said Franco, adding that the neighbors she spoke with were in agreement. "Everybody had the same response: 'This expansion cannot happen.'"

During a Jan. 18 town hall meeting, organized and hosted by Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt via Zoom, residents said the center's most recent plans to expand one site from six beds to 10 would exacerbate problems with overcrowding.

The neighboring house, also owned by Muir Wood, is already home to an expanded bed count of 10, and associated staff, say neighbors, who stress that the four-bed expansion shouldn't be considered in a vacuum.

“The company clearly can't handle the number of teenagers it already has based on law enforcement calls, which include assaults and mental health emergencies,” Young said. “Yet it is trying to get permission for more than 42 patients and staff in what is supposed to be two residential homes. I can't think of another situation where the county allows two dozen people in a single family home, particularly for commercial use.”

During the Jan. 28 forum, neighbors detailed a slew of negative experiences with the Skillman Lane properties, and they pushed planning officials, as well as Rabbitt, to consider revoking the existing expansion permit in place for one of the two adjacent homes.

In one instance, Rick Parmer, a one-time member of law enforcement, said his home was the site of a harrowing altercation involving Sonoma County Sheriff's Deputies and a teenager who had run away from the Skillman Lane center.

Another time, he let a lone teen use his phone before getting suspicious and deducing that the boy was yet another runaway.

“I looked at my cell phone, and said, ‘Oh, I think this guy just ran away from Muir Wood,’” Parmer said. “The Sheriff's car came, and detained the young man.”

There have been at least 50 runaways from the original facility since it opened in 2013, according to police records tied to the site. The potential presence of troubled youth in the neighborhood has frightened many residents, including Parmer's wife, Janet Parmer, who said she worries about encountering another runaway teenager at the property.

“It's really frightening,” Janet Parmer said, expressing worries about her grandchildren, her property value, and acknowledging that she “wouldn't have moved here” if she knew the home would neighbor a juvenile rehabilitation facility.

Sowle said he has heard neighbors' concerns, and is preparing to defend his center's track record at Thursday's hearing. He says the expansion request doesn't entail any construction. Instead, it would involve adding bunk beds to existing rooms.

Muir Wood has commissioned studies measuring both the noise produced on the Skillman Lane property, and the property's impact on the local water table. In both cases, Sowle said, the concerns were unfounded.

Sowle has also pushed back on neighbors' concerns about his clients, saying none have been in trouble with the law in the center's nearly 10 years of operations.

“I can’t speak for the neighbors, and I can’t speak for their fears; I can just speak for the facts,” Sowle said. “And the fact is, our kids aren’t committing any crimes.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: This story has been updated to correct references to Janet Parmer’s grandchildren.*

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