

Muir Wood youth treatment center expansion plans scuttled by Sonoma County board

Lauren Franco handed out more than 80 letters throughout her rural Petaluma neighborhood, hoping to stop the planned expansion of the Muir Wood Adolescent and Family Services center. The effort worked, with the Sonoma County Board of Zoning Adjustments agreeing Friday to reject expansion plans. (CRISSY PASCUAL/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF)



[TYLER SILVY](#)

ARGUS-COURIER EDITOR

February 10, 2022, 6:35PM#

#

The Sonoma County Board of Zoning Adjustments on Thursday rejected an expansion effort by a Petaluma juvenile treatment center, saying any greater use of the rural, Skillman Lane property would jeopardize neighborhood compatibility.

The unanimous vote Thursday came after weeks of outreach from concerned neighbors, who wrote letters, compiled data and knocked on doors in an effort to stymie Muir Wood Adolescent and Family Services, which sought to increase the bed count at one of its sites to 10 from six.

“The neighborhood is very grateful the board was able to sort through the evidence and vote unanimously against the expansion,” said Tobias Young, a neighbor, via email. “We all support treatment for troubled teenagers, especially in an age where kids are struggling through a pandemic. However, there comes a point where a single residential neighborhood can only shoulder so much of the burden.”

In an email late Thursday, Muir Wood founder Scott Sowle recounted the tearful testimony of parents showing support for the center during the earlier hearing, and he highlighted the board’s praise of Muir Wood.

“The Board of Zoning Adjustments in their decision today admitted that Muir Wood is an extremely well run program. And, one that is significantly needed in Sonoma County,” Sowle said. “I appreciate their acknowledgement.”

The inpatient home at 1743 Skillman Lane, sits next to another Muir Wood site, representing two of the Petaluma-based company’s eight residential treatment facilities in Sonoma County. Because one of the facilities had already received a permit to expand, the properties already regularly host up to 16 adolescent boys.

The cumulative impact to neighbors was a key motivator in the board’s decision Thursday, said Commissioner Eric Koeningshofer, a 5th District appointee.

“The most salient issues were all around the issue of neighborhood compatibility,” Koeningshofer said in a phone interview afterward. “The view was that the size of the property, the number of residents currently there, between the two properties...it had more to do with the ability to manage that number of people, including the fact that it’s a high staff number on the property, and having it work with the neighbors.”

The rejection won’t become final until staff can draft a resolution reflecting the board’s direction, namely that of 2nd District Commissioner Larry Reed, who initiated the motion to reject the application. Reed, who was appointed by Supervisor David Rabbitt, declined to comment, citing the concerns of Sonoma County lawyers.

Muir Wood will have 11 days to appeal the decision, once it’s is final. Sowle did not indicate in his Thursday evening email whether the company would do so.

“Muir Wood will continue to be a trusted resource for local families,” Sowle said in the email. “The need for high quality mental health care for our kids in Sonoma County is urgent, more now than ever. We simply cannot fail our kids. One life lost because of a lack of access to treatment, is just simply unacceptable. Muir Wood has positively touched the lives of thousands in Sonoma County, either directly or indirectly. Our hope is that their voices will grow in numbers, be a significant influence, and affect positive change in our county.”

Koeningshofer said neighbors and Muir Wood officials came well prepared to state their respective cases, and he was careful to separate the board's vote Thursday from any critique of the facility's operations to date.

"All four commissioners expressed support and appreciation for the work being done on facilities like this," Koeningshofer said. "And it just boiled down to a compatibility issue."

The push by neighbors to have the county reject this latest expansion effort comes as teen mental health issues have escalated amid the coronavirus pandemic, according to a survey detailed by 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, before the center's application was rejected. "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 a site next door to the original, and four dedicated to helping young girls.

Neighbors, typically, would have no say in the business of a juvenile treatment facility such as 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 sites, from buying up whole blocks of homes to expand their footprint.

It's a carve-out neighbors have lamented, as some push to have the center's other expansion permit revoked in an effort to bring the number of juveniles at the Skillman Lane sites to a "more reasonable" number - 12.

"Muir Wood is a private commercial operation that brings in as much as \$20.6 million a year, with patients coming from all over the country," Young said in the email. "The neighborhood presented overwhelming evidence showing Muir Wood is a nuisance with 198 sheriff calls, a pattern of runaways arrested in the back yards of homes and issues such as noise, lighting and water use."

In a prior interview, Sowle disputed the characterization that Muir Wood caters to affluent, out-of-county families, saying 90% of the center's patients are covered by in-network insurance providers. Sowle, who pointed troubling data around adolescent mental health in Sonoma County as evidence of the need locally, did not provide the percentage of Muir Wood clients that are from Sonoma County.

Neighbors spent weeks rallying to fight the expansion, even establishing a website to document the effort. They tracked nearly 200 calls to law enforcement, including least 50 cases of teens running away from the two sites on Skillman lane.

During a Jan. 18 town hall meeting, organized and hosted by Sonoma County Supervisor David Rabbitt via Zoom, Assistant Sheriff Eddie Engram said the number and types of calls - including calls about noise - appeared similar to what law enforcement sees around similar inpatient care sites.

For residents near the Skillman Lane homes, though, the disruptions, including late-night yelling and harrowing encounters with law enforcement apprehending runaways patients, was already too much to bear.

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, and she credited neighbors' advocacy for derailing the Muir Wood expansion effort.

"I believe everything that was done prior to that really made the success of today – all of the letters...everything the commissioners got to see, all of the research that all of the neighbors put in, really made what happened today happen," Franco said.

Tyler Silvy is editor of the Petaluma Argus-Courier. Reach him at tyler.silvy@arguscourier.com, 707-776-8458, or @tylersilvy on Twitter.