

WATCh East proposal supported

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Comments made by area residents at the May 1 public hearing to increase capacity at WATCh East were almost exclusively positive.

Based on current waiting lists and projections of growing demand the Montana Department of Corrections has made increasing the number of DUI treatment beds in the state a priority. Rick Deady, Treatment Contract Program Manager for the Adult Communities Correction Division at the Montana Department of Corrections, explained that the DOC proposes increasing capacity at WATCh East by 10 beds and at WATCh West in Warm Springs by 40 beds.

Although WATCh East Program Coordinator Deb Dion proposed several other changes to the administrative rules, capacity is the only issue being addressed at this time.

Lori Muller, who said she lived within sight of the facility, was the only person who spoke in opposition to the expansion. While she supports the program itself, she has been opposed to its location in the Hillcrest/Georgetown subdivision from the beginning, Muller said, citing safety concerns. Muller also disapproved of the methods used in the DOC's survey on the capacity issue. She and several other Hillcrest residents did not receive surveys at all, and some people chose not to return them because the surveys were identified by residents' names rather than numbers. In the future, Muller suggested that the DOC use a neutral third party to administer the survey.

According to Deady, the DOC sent out 430 surveys, 215 to homes in the subdivision and 215 to other homes in Glendive. Two-hundred sixteen surveys were returned, of which 201 were in favor of the proposal and 15 against. People who have not yet returned the surveys have until May 15 for their comments to be considered. Comments made on the surveys will be compiled and presented to the Glendive City Council, Deady said.

Eight people in attendance spoke in favor of increasing capacity at WATCh East. Each one cited the obvious need for the program as a factor in their support. "Eastern Montana deserves a facility like this and deserves an expansion to fit the need of the people," Pat Mischel stated. "If (the need) is not met, the devastation to the community and to family members is just terrible," Bob Anderson added.

Other supporters pointed out that only nonviolent offenders are accepted at WATCh East. "These are good people that made some bad choices, as we all do," noted Deb Mooer.

Bob Ackerman spoke in favor not only of the treatment program itself, but also its economic impact on the community, pointing out that it provides good jobs with benefits to area residents.

The Department of Corrections will accept written comments on the rule change until 5 p.m. May 15. Interested parties should send comments to Myrna Omholt-Mason, 1539 11th Ave., P.O. Box 201301, Helena, MT 59602-1301.

Hearings Examiner Brenda Elias said a final decision can be expected within one month of that date.