



Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans

Let your voice be heard in rebuilding the Greater New Orleans Area


[Home](#)
[About Us](#)
[Our Reform Initiatives](#)
[Resources & Collaborations](#)
[Archives](#)
[Contact Us](#)

Media

[Criminal Justice Home](#)
[Criminal Justice Committee Activities](#)
[Committee Members](#)
[Legislative Activity](#)
[Resources](#)
[Archives](#)

Times-Picayune

EDITORIAL: Cooperate on juvenile center

Saturday, January 24, 2009

The Nagin administration says that it will meet with all stakeholders before designing the city's new juvenile detention center, but the City Council wants more assurance that the advice of national experts will be heeded.

That's why the City Council adopted an ordinance this week that requires the council's Criminal Justice Committee to sign off on plans before Mayor Ray Nagin can spend any of the \$16 million designated for the center.

The council's action has triggered talk of a mayoral veto, and administration officials say that the ordinance could delay construction.

No one should want to see this critical project delayed. Conditions at the storm-damaged Youth Study Center have been described as squalid, and building a new facility for juvenile offenders is an urgent priority for New Orleans.

But the council's concern is justified given the administration's poor track record on the Youth Study Center. New Orleans Juvenile Court officials, the League of Women Voters and Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans have pushed for reforms at the detention center without success. And more than a year ago, the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana filed suit on behalf of juveniles held there, describing inhumane conditions such as 20-hour confinement in cells and inadequate schooling, medical care and even food.

Attorneys with the Juvenile Justice Project have said that the administration has failed to work with national experts, specifically those with the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Indeed, administration officials said last month that the lawsuit itself prevents the city from working with the foundation or any other organization to improve the center. Given that absurd position, it's reasonable to wonder how the city plans to involve experts in decisions about the new center.

Deputy Chief Administrative Officer Cynthia Sylvain-Lear said that the administration has chosen an architect but is not yet ready to bring in outside stakeholders. But that involvement needs to happen early in the process.

The administration would have more credibility if it had implemented recommendations on how to operate the center -- suggestions that Juvenile Court Judge David Bell has described as low-cost or no-cost.

Councilwoman Shelley Midura, who authored the ordinance, said she and others on the council fear that the administration will design the center without expert input.

Ms. Sylvain-Lear and Capital Projects Administrator William Chrisman said that the council's ordinance is too broad and would require committee approval for every expenditure. That would be inefficient, but Ms. Midura said that she had used language that Mr. Chrisman had previously said was acceptable.

The council wants a chance to review plans before architects are authorized to create construction documents, she said. That sounds like a reasonable level of oversight.

Instead of being defensive, the administration ought to welcome input from the justice committee as well as national experts. Everyone's goal should be the same: replacing the old center with a model facility as quickly as possible.

