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# Column: Protectionism in juvenile corrections

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Suppose you own two automobiles; a brand-new, 8-seat SUV and an old, broken-down coupe. The SUV is more than capable of safely and conveniently transporting your family to their individual destinations, while every trip with the coupe is a roll of the dice. Would you pay to keep it running in its current state? Moreover, would you [borrow money](#) from your neighbor to do so?

The current notion of keeping open an unneeded, and ineffective state youth lockup that was budgeted for closure is no less senseless.



On Aug. 30, the Texas [Juvenile Justice Department](#) (TJJD) recommended that the Corsicana Residential Treatment Center (CRTC) be shuttered pursuant to provision in the state budget that called for the closure of at least one youth lockup.

The CRTC is home to the [Texas Juvenile Justice Department's](#) specialized treatment accommodations for adjudicated delinquents who are mentally ill, sex offenders, substance abusers, or sentenced under a serious violent or capital crime. However, due to the success of Texas' recent efforts to strengthen community-based juvenile justice programs and the precipitous drop in juvenile crime, Texas has only about 1,300 youths locked up at the state level compared with about 5,000 in 2005. Therefore, state taxpayers stand to benefit from the closure of another lockup with those incarcerated there being

redistributed to other facilities.

The CRTC campus, having once served as a 19th century orphanage, is strewn with dangerous debris, including broken glass and sharp rocks. Despite efforts to remove the hazard, inclement weather frequently unearths harmful objects. Couple this with an impulsive population at elevated risk for self-injury and you can imagine the additional [medical costs](#), and chaos.

After looking at many factors including the costs of operating each facility, projected capital costs, and the quality and effectiveness of programming, the highly respected head of the Texas Juvenile Justice Department, Mike Griffiths, along with Governor Rick Perry and Senate [Criminal Justice](#) Chairman John Whitmire have determined the CRTC campus is the one to shutter. However, the Texas Tribune reported that leaders who represent the area around the CRTC have prevailed upon House leaders to hold up the closure.

This is a costly mistake for Texas taxpayers. In terms of capital expenditures alone, the CRTC will require the immediate investment of over \$35.5 million, almost \$312,000 per each bed of residential capacity, just to bring its physical plant and buildings up to standards. This is over 50 times greater than the required per-bed capital need of the next-highest facility, and over 128 times greater than the combined average of the five other facilities. If the plant and buildings were to be replaced with modern structures and amenities, these multiples jump to 79 and 201 times greater, respectively.

The yawning gap in unaddressed capital expenses does not account for the additional \$37,000 per day in operational costs needed to keep the facility open past Oct. 31. The trending decline in capacity needs (driven mostly by increasing use of more cost-efficient community corrections programs) was accounted for in the

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budget which assumes \$23 million in facility closure savings. Failure to close the CRTC will either result in busting the budget or curtailing critical security, treatment, and educational operations that are needed to promote public safety and rehabilitation.

In addition to the fiscal benefits of closing the CRTC, doing so is likely to increase the quality of care. One of the key factors the TJJ's recommendation to close CRTC is the scarcity of qualified mental health professionals in Navarro County. Accordingly, CRTC has a psychiatrist vacancy rate of about 60 percent. The suggested new location of the specialized treatment unit, McClennan County, has nearly 5 times the population and a top-tier research university.

The consequence of closing CRTC is not that these youths will be released or go untreated, it is that they will receive treatment elsewhere than in Corsicana where mental health professionals are more prevalent.

Policy decisions concerning correctional institutions must be made with a focus on achieving the greatest public safety with every taxpayer dollar spent. Texas taxpayers should not be required to sustain a facility simply because it employs people. Just like a second car that rarely starts and is never driven, an unneeded lockup is a luxury Texans cannot afford.

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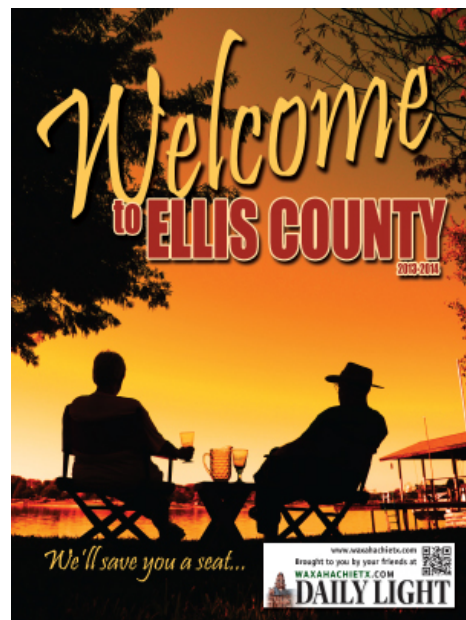
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