

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
FOR ST. MARY'S COUNTY**

**PUBLIC FORUM
Ridge Volunteer Fire Department, 13820 Point Lookout
Road, Ridge, Maryland
6:30 pm
Wednesday, February 14, 2007**

Present: Commissioner President Francis Jack Russell
Commissioner Kenneth R. Dement
Commissioner Thomas A. Mattingly, Sr.

Commissioner President Russell opened the Public Forum at 6:30 pm. The Commissioners scheduled the forum primarily to address concerns from the community regarding the Youth Challenge Academy program that will be housed at Camp Riverview in Scotland, Maryland, for its first session from February to July 2007. The camp is a second chance program for at-risk school dropouts from Washington, D.C.

Mr. Gordon Sampson, Youth Challenge Academy program director, described the goals of the Youth Academy and showed a video to illustrate the program in more detail. Mr. Sampson introduced General Earl Schwartz, Washington D.C. National Guard, who also provided opening remarks. Lt. General Wendy Messick, National Guard, and Barbara Brown, Outreach Coordinator for the Youth Challenge Academy at Camp Riverview and St. Mary's County resident, were also in attendance. Ms. Beverly Reed, also a local resident, provided a history of her positive experiences with the program.

The forum was open for comment and questions from the public:

Pam McKay, 48676 Packer Ct., St. Inigoes

I have no doubt that this is a good program and want to thank the National Guard for supporting the program and for the defense of our country. But, is Scotland the right place for this camp? We don't get a lot of crime in our area right now. Is the facility secure? Will our neighbors, especially the seniors be safe? Will the participants in the program receive visits from their friends? If this is going to be forced on us, why couldn't the St. Mary's County "at-risk" youth be offered such a program?

Mr. Sampson's response: Is the facility secure? Yes. Our students are watched 24/7. This is a major component of our program. Maryland runs a Youth Challenge Academy in Aberdeen, Maryland. Our students can't have juvenile records. They are asked this question in the screening process and we also go back to the records.

Martin Cribb, Scotland

I can't think of a worse place to have a camp like this than in Scotland. My first knowledge of the camp was reading about it in the Enterprise. Mr. Sampson, you say you want to be a part of the community, but you can't do that by stabbing us in the back. No one was notified that the students were coming. The Commissioners didn't know. We have problems already down here - - roads, drainage, terrible treatment plant problems and Point Lookout State Park is a major problem. Our neighbors can't hook up to water and sewer. You said you notified the Jaycees (Chamber), we only have two businesses here - - Raley's Market and Rick's Marine. I'm not happy and many of my neighbors are not happy.

Bernie Gascon, 15225 Lake Dr., Scotland

Per the 80's Point Lookout Sewer Agreement - - 2 camps: Riverview and Brown. Will the population at Riverview go above the reserved capacity as per the 80's Point Lookout Sewer Agreement? What is the year-round capacity of the camp?

Mr. Sampson's response: 37 students. IF we stay, the maximum we would go up to is 100. We are looking at other sites. If you close your eyes, no child in the program is different than any child in your community. They are not criminals. They just need our help and we can't close our eyes to the problem of students dropping out of school. I don't know how to address the sewer question. (The Commissioners will look into this.)

Minnie Russell, 16477 Dunbar Road, Ridge

I try to put myself in the environment at Riverview. Usually summer camps are not prepared for winter elements. Put yourself on the streets in Washington, D.C. You are young, free, parents aren't interested in what you are doing, and now, you have a guard 24-7, you've gone from pavement to dirt road and someone is telling you what to do. Now you are in a military environment. This is a big adjustment. Does the camp have a brig? Do you have a way of stopping them from doing what you don't want them to do? In the film students are shown describing previous drug use. Do you do drug testing? Our hospitals are full right now. Will they have cell phones? Do you fingerprint them? What about DNA?

Cheri Taylor, 42840 Lytle Lane, Leonardtown

I read the article about the Youth Challenge Academy in the Enterprise. I had a son who was in need of such a program. When he was 23 years old we finally got him in a program and he will graduate next month. If there had been a program like this, he could have been helped much sooner. Regarding Minnie Russell's comments about the students being free on the streets of D.C. and then confined to the camp, this is a volunteer program. The students must volunteer to enroll in the camp and must show that they want to change their lives. They will listen. They want the structure, discipline, and someone to care about them and tell them what to do. My husband and I had a ministry in our home for kids of all kinds - - drug dealers, etc. This camp is a wonderful opportunity for these youth. If not in your area - - where? I would welcome this kind of program in my area. If they keep getting turned down - -where will they go?

Junior Trossbach (owns farm next to camp)

I have concerns about the camp which borders my property. There is no security fence - - just a creek separating the camp from my farm. Who will be responsible if a student leaves the camp and comes to one of my barns, smokes a cigarette and burns my barn down? Who is liable if something like this happens?

Greg Havens, 16975 Bay Creek Lane, Dameron

I have the same question. What is the liability situation? Who is liable if there is damage, etc.? Also, what is in it for the County? Will you purchase food or other goods and services locally? You mentioned that the students will do "community service?" What input do we have to these things?

Mr. Sampson's response: Liability rests with those persons responsible for the action. The kids are watched 24/7. We have to do this. Anything could happen - - whether the camp is in St. Mary's or any other location. I understand your concerns, but if you meet the young people, you would know them. They have the same hopes and dreams of any other young people. If you look inside your own house, you will see them. We need to help them now at this stage in their lives. We don't have criminals in the program. We can't take children on drugs. Right now they are going through "hard core." They are not used to structure. It's a culture shock for them. I have seen the transformation in the youth when hard core is completed. I invite you to come down to visit. The parents visit the camp only twice during the program. They do not have visits from friends. These kids will not be pilfering your community or hurting anyone. I have interviewed each one of them. I have been in education for 37 years. I know teenagers. We can't turn our backs on these young kids who need our help.

Regarding the "what's in it for us?" question: There is a difference between service to the community and community service. We do "service to the community," as opposed to what the court mandates - - "community service." If you have a senior citizen home that needs some assistance, or an environmental clean up project, let us know. We are also looking for four employees to help out with food service. These jobs pay \$10 per hour. We want to be a service to the community. If there are things you need in the community, call me at 202-685-9986. Our young people owe a debt. Also, most of our employees are from the Southern Maryland area. Our Outreach Coordinator, Ms. Brown, lives in St. Mary's County. We have job opportunities here.

Bobby Gant, 15745 Pratt Rd., Ridge

Are the students encouraged to attend church?

Mr. Sampson's response: We can't force them, but we will encourage them to go. We will go with them if they want to go to church. Sunday is their only day to relax, but they must also study.

Commissioner Mattingly: Of your 32 employees - - what are their qualifications, educational background, etc.?

Mr. Sampson's response: Deputy Director is an ex-Marine who has worked at the Virginia Challenge Camp. Commandant is an ex-Marine. Teaching staff are degreed. Counseling staff: one out of two is degreed, experienced in individual and group counseling, as well as college prep. We have Cadre Leaders, Community Outreach Director, Technology person, secretary, nurse, and the support of the National Guard. The class size is 1-12. Separate barracks and eating times for boys and girls. The National Guard Bureau has provided a huge binder of regulations that we must follow. Youth Challenge Academy is funded with 60% federal and 40% Washington, D.C., government funds.

Claude McNair, 15085 Lake Drive, Scotland

We are located at the end of the County. Our closest police station is in Lexington Park. Will we have the support of the police? Will they be more supportive than they are now? We don't see many police cars down here. What happens to the kids who don't make it and have to leave the program?

Mr. Sampson's response: We try to make it hard for them to go back to where they came from. I am the only one that can dismiss a student. If I find that a student is not going to make it or is detrimental to what we are trying to do, they will be placed in one of the vans that we keep on site and driven back to the National Guard offices in Washington, D.C., where they will be picked up by their parents.

Maryan Horne, 49566 Cornfield Harbor Rd., Scotland

This is the first time that the camp has been quiet when it is being occupied. They are being controlled. We do have a dangerous narrow road - - it should be widened or another lane put in. What happens to the camp in the two months that there is no school?

Mr. Sampson's response: We will run the camp from January to July and run one again from July to December. This is being worked on. I don't know for sure about the future, but we plan to run two back to back camps at this time.

John Helwig, Camp caretaker at Brown

My concern is - - how many are watching the 37 kids? At Brown, every six kids had two counselors, and these were young kids. What will prevent them from coming across the creek?

Mr. Sampson: I can assure you they won't come across the creek. The kids do not have their old friends with them. They don't even know where they are and wouldn't know where to go if they could leave.

Martin Cribb, Scotland

We have had major problems at the Point Lookout State Park over the last two summers - - problems with MS-13 Hispanic gang members. There have been riots and assaults. My question to police is: now that we have no State Park Rangers, just DNR law enforcement that is stretched very thin, have you been in touch with the state to see if

back up will be available for MS 13 problems? Will patrols be expanded in the park? When we call the police (DNR) now, it can take a couple of hours for them to get here. We are also having drug problems in the Scotland/Ridge area.

Tim Cameron, Sheriff, St. Mary's County

After listening to the presentations tonight, my concerns have been somewhat assuaged. However, any time a group of people are brought together, and even if their conduct is good, Fire and EMS and other agencies need to get involved and that is the challenge we have. The type of presentations we have had this evening should have been done in advance. There is always concern when people are not fully informed. Most of the concerns could have been alleviated. Limited in manpower. Officers coming from Lexington Park where we have the most demand for police services. Yes, MS-13 comes and goes in St. Mary's County. We are looking at this and at the drug problems they bring with them. We have tried to increase our visibility, but we are still dealing with the same number of officers. And, yes, we will work in a collaborative manner with state law enforcement.

Mr. Sampson's response: I apologize for the misunderstandings. Our youth will be subject to the laws just like everyone else. Our rules and regulations are also very strict. We do want to work with law enforcement.

Dan Morris, Scotland

I want to thank the Guard. I believe in the concept of the Youth Challenge Academy, but I'm just concerned about the location. You won't get permits if you want to build 60 homes. Camp was built as a summer camp. The sewer system won't support the camp in a healthy way. The ground won't take it - - it's already saturated. I have raised boys and know that when they get impetuous, they can be out the door in a hurry and with you in hot pursuit. There is no real security. I hope your students do well and wish them success. But, there will be incidents. Our Health Department needs to look at the waste treatment situation and do an evaluation.

Mr. Sampson's response: Regarding the longevity of the camp - - I can't say at this point. It is being looked into now. I don't know where we will be next year.

Shayne Smith, 49460 Fresh Pond Neck Rd., Ridge

My niece had similar troubles and went to a program in Baltimore. She did not get a GED there. We often want to turn our backs on the problem of school drop outs. We need to take our blinders off. It's all around us.

Pam McKay

What are the Commissioners' concerns? What will be our input into this matter?

Commissioner President Russell's response: The camp is a federal facility on federal property. We did not find out that the camp was coming until we read the newspaper article. Regarding the waste treatment issues - - we will find the answers and respond in due time.

Commissioner Mattingly: The biggest mistake that was made by the Youth Challenge Academy was that they did not attempt to inform the citizens ahead of time and get the community's buy-in ahead of time. If a meeting like this had taken place first, it could have settled some of the citizen's concerns. Instead, the Camp staff released an article to the press. It is federal property that we do not have any control over. There is no other environmental problem other than the capacity of the system. It is important that you reach out and realize the impact of the camp on this community. You need to convince them that you can meet the challenges and concerns they have raised. You missed the boat by not informing the community in advance.

Commissioner Dement: I was one of the first to get calls from citizens about their concerns. The Commissioners got on top of the matter as soon as we could and arranged to have this public meeting. Regarding the sewer issue - - we can follow this up with the state and MetCom to determine if there is a problem. I still have some concerns about security. Is the National Guard your security?

Mr. Sampson: No, the National Guard is not our security. I want to apologize to County government for not informing them and others in advance.

General Earl Schwartz: The start up for this camp was very rapid. Mr. Sampson did his best. Were there some missteps? Yes. On the longevity question, we don't know at this point. But we know that the demand for the program is great. We may outgrow the capacity at Riverview. We may have just one camp here and then have to move on. We will continue to serve the kids. If this area can't accommodate the program, we will look elsewhere. We thank you for any support you can give us. The kids I saw today are not the same kids I saw at intake on Sunday. The turn-around in four days is amazing. I want to invite the Commissioners to come and visit so you can see that the kids are not criminals.

Dr. Kathy O'Brien, Exec. Director, Walden-Sierra

I want to commend the citizens tonight for their decorum and the respect shown to the presenters. This is a community that cares about our young people. Please take advantage of the valued resources we have in our community that can work with you to ensure the students are successful. I have visited the program in Aberdeen and believe this is a very valuable program. Keep in mind that our kids are in other people's communities right now in other kinds of programs. A change of scenery and environment can help the spirit. The young people at Camp Riverview are not used to not having the lights of the city. I appreciate your candor when you say that you can't guarantee that nothing will happen. You are well-staffed, however and you have minimized concerns. The youth are not going next door if they leave the camp, they are going home. I encourage you to consider having neighbors of the Camp on a local advisory board. Don't conduct your program in isolation. There are many valuable resources in this community that can work with you. We know that these kids are supervised; many young people in our community do not have any supervision at all. These are our children.

Amy Fehagen

What type of children are at the camp? When you say they can't be in trouble with the law, please clarify because the film seemed to say otherwise. What about attempted murder? How many incidents have there been in the past of kids getting out and causing problems? If you expand and the road is not sufficient, will we have to pay for road improvements?

Mr. Sampson's response: Young people have a whole lot of experiences with many things in their lives. I'm sure St. Mary's County is not immune from children's problems.

The youth at the camp may have been involved with the law at some point, but we are getting them away from these types of problems, drugs, and peer pressure. They are volunteering for this program. No child can be involved with the courts or have a probation officer and get into the program. This is a national program. We couldn't exist if there were problems in the communities where we are housed. We need the support of the communities where we are located. I will defer to local government officials regarding the road issues. Please call me directly with your concerns: 202-685-9986.

Minnie Russell

You said 37 students are at the camp. The paper said the number of students could go as high as 200. There was a prisoner of war camp down here and they couldn't detain them. Why not put the camp at Walter Reed? Is the camp winterized? I want to call on Dr. Martirano to make a statement.

Mr. Sampson's response: We will not have 200 students. The most our next class will have is 80-90. The camp facility is winterized.

Dr. Martirano, Superintendent, St. Mary's County Schools

I want to welcome Mr. Sampson and the National Guard. I have lots of questions, too. This is a community that cares. If this informational meeting had been held ahead of time, we would have had better information to go on. What does "mentoring" mean? What is involved in your mentoring program? We have very strict policies on the selection of mentors and mentoring programs in St. Mary's County. We will continue to dialogue with you. I'm learning tonight just like the other attendees.

Steven Clark, 49293 Harry James Rd., Ridge

I want to express my support for the camp. I don't think these are hardened criminals. I spent 20 years in the military. I was like these kids in my youth. I didn't drop out of school, but I did things with my buddies Someone asked - why have the camp here? The youth don't know anyone or anything about the area. If they want to leave, they will go home, not next door. They don't have access to their civilian gear or any weapons. They are searched and are supervised 100% of the time; and, they have no money. They have no way to get home and no access to their friends. Give them a fair shake. The Youth Academy is trying to do good. We should allow it.

Marjorie Ridgell

I am a bus contractor and my bus goes down Cornfield Harbor Road twice a day. This road is not fit for a bus at any time. What will happen when there is extra traffic?

Commissioner Mattingly's response: There is not going to be a significant increase in traffic from the camp.

Mr. Sampson thanked all of the citizens and Commissioners for attending the meeting. He asked that any retired military interested in working as Cadre Leaders and any citizens

interested in serving on the advisory board give their name and phone number to Donna Gebicke or contact him directly at the Camp.

Commissioner President Russell thanked all of the participants and closed the forum at 9:00 pm.

ADJOURNMENT

The public forum adjourned at 9:00 pm.

Minutes Approved by the Board of County Commissioners on _____

Donna Gebicke, Administrative Assistant