

BAY AREA

AND CALIFORNIA



MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

The lobby of Alameda County's new juvenile hall is bright and airy, featuring public art displays such as sculptures, murals and oil paintings.

SAN LEANDRO

New juvenile hall dedicated

Modern center opens in April after battles between activists, planners

By Jim Herron Zamora
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

On a steep hill above San Leandro, the gleaming new Alameda County Juvenile Hall sits only about 100 yards from the shabby, worn building it will replace next month.

But the new juvenile hall, which was dedicated Tuesday, represents a half-century of improvements over the sprawling beige-gray structure it replaces.

"This facility is everything we hoped for," said Supervisor Scott Haggerty, president of Alameda County Board of Supervisors. "It's one of the best in the country."

Built in 1953, the old juvenile hall is even uglier on the inside than it appears on the outside. The vinyl is peeling in some places, and many of the metal and concrete surfaces appear chipped and scratched. Much of the living area smells of a mix of cleaning solvents and years of accu-

mulated dirt and stains.

"I won't miss this nasty old place much," said Michael Jackson Jr., whose job as an institutional officer is a mix of jail guard and counselor. "It's badly designed. It's totally out of date. Good riddance. I think the new hall will be safer and more efficient for everybody."

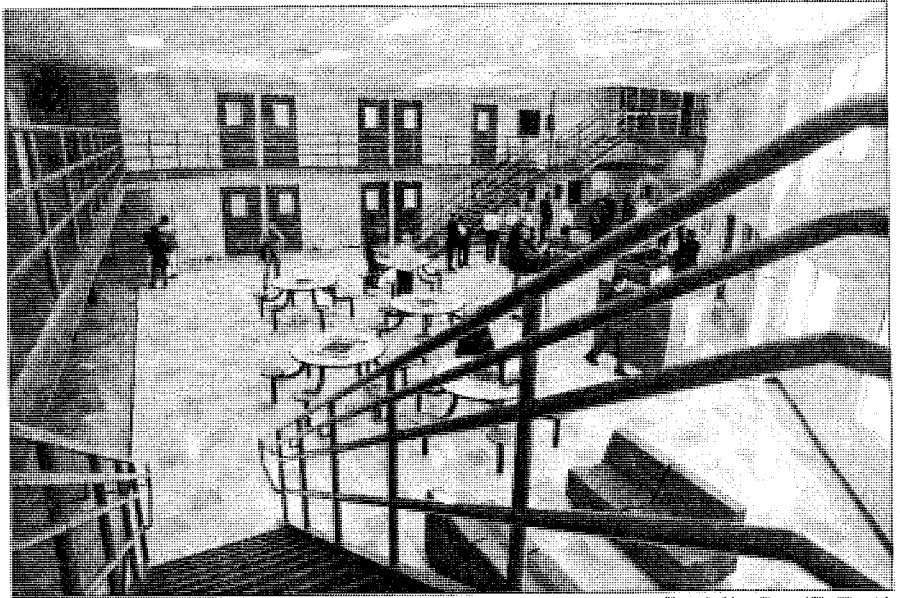
In contrast, the new juvenile hall is intended to look — on the outside — more like a high school than a prison. The main lobby looks more

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► For a video look at the new Alameda County Juvenile Hall, go to sfgate.com.

like a courthouse, with a terrazzo floor and \$1 million in public art projects, including sculptures, murals and oil paintings. It has five courtrooms and offices for prosecutors, judges, public defenders and court clerks.

Jackson gave The Chronicle a tour
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Photos by MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

A common area central to the residential units is among the improvements in the new juvenile hall.

Officials praise improvements

► JUVENILE HALL

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of the mazelike old hall just hours before county authorities dedicated the new complex, which is expected to be fully open by early April. Employees have long grumbled that the old one is inefficient because counselors and wards have to spend so much time on the walkways that connect the various parts of the building. On breaks from class, the wards — clad in blue or pink shirts depending on their gender — line up with their hands behind their backs and march from one room to the next. They'll spend a lot less time marching in the new juvenile hall, which is bigger but with a more compact design.

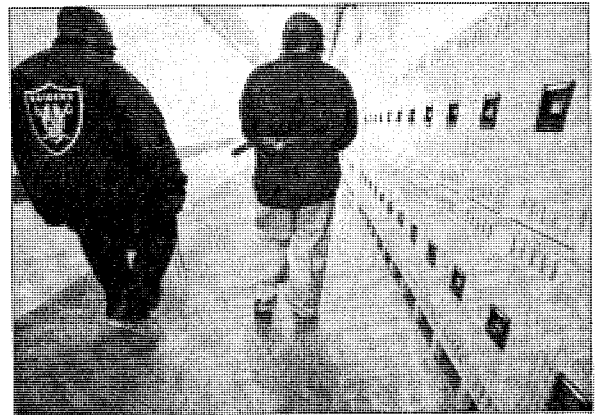
The old building has a capacity of 300 but currently houses about 240 inmates, who range from kids who spent several hours in custody on minor charges to accused killers, who spend as long as a year awaiting trial.

The new 365,000-square-foot compound cost \$176 million and can accommodate 360 inmates, called wards, in a modern center in which all doors are opened and closed electronically and everything is visible on 127 video cameras monitored from a central control room.

"If everyone knows they are being recorded on tape, you will see them on their best behavior," Blevins said. "It gives us some leverage ... for behavior modification," making it easier to determine who started a fight between wards, for example.

The whole project was built after years of debate and fighting among activists who wanted a smaller center, and law enforcement personnel and planners who wanted more capacity based on the county's growing population.

Ultimately, a compromise was struck for a modest increase in size. The county juvenile hall



Court transportation officer Derek Smith escorts a ward to his unit after a court hearing. Courtrooms are part of the center.

opens at a time when the state is scrambling to improve its juvenile prison system, the California Youth Authority, which has been widely criticized for failing to prevent sexual abuse and allowing gangs to flourish.

Among the most visible changes in the new center is the way health care and classrooms are incorporated into the dorm areas of the new juvenile hall. Many wards will be able to see their classrooms from their cells. Each section of juvenile hall will also have health care professionals — specializing in medical and mental health — in a clinic that is next to their living areas.

As part of the new juvenile hall, the county doubled the amount of resources on site, said Alex Briscoe, of the Alameda County Health Care Services Agency.

"We in health care really see this as an opportunity to serve an underserved population," particularly in mental health and anti-violence counseling, Briscoe said. "Young people didn't come out of their mamas acting this way. ... This is an opportunity for us to really address the needs of these kids in a way we haven't been able

to." Juvenile hall employees, from counselors and teachers to guards and probation officers, praised the new juvenile hall.

Roderick Reed sounded one cautionary note about the new building. A 20-year veteran counselor/officer, Reed has spent the past nine years monitoring the high-security wards, which generally include youths accused of murders, nonfatal shootings, carjacking and robberies. Many of the high-security wards spend more time in juvenile hall than other inmates because they are awaiting trial or sentencing for more serious crimes.

"It'll stress the kids to have to move, and that's something we have to work through," Reed said. "I'll miss the old facility in that there aren't many surprises here. In the new place, I'll have to figure out the sight lines, the blind spots. My job is to keep an eye on these kids and try to help them. It's a hard job sometimes — that doesn't change in a new building."

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