

Stockley Center's future examined
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By James Fisher
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Proposals that would open the Stockley Center to public use as a health center, a community garden or a new piece of infrastructure rated highly in a survey of 98 ideas for developing the 90-year-old facility.

The Stockley Center's future was the topic of a meeting last week led by a consultant for the state Department of Health and Social Services, which is pondering what to do with a property that once housed hundreds of developmentally disabled patients.

Stockley's role as a residential facility has changed as there has been more mainstreaming of the developmentally disabled and residential care has shifted to smaller, group homes. About 60 people incapable of any self-care now reside at Stockley, officials said. It also provides daytime activities for more independent clients.

The change has DHSS exploring ways to add public uses to the property, which has hundreds of acres of woods and nature trails.

"Many groups had come to my attention and said, can we think about utilizing Stockley in a broader way?" said Rita Landgraf, the department's secretary. She attended the meeting, along with other state officials and advocates for the disabled.

In a complex sorting process called concept mapping, people with a stake in Stockley's use rated one another's ideas for the property.

A health-centered use - an adult day care center, 24-hour child care or a place where caregivers could get respite from their duties - was deemed the most important in the study, but not as feasible as two other approaches. A new role for the land as a community garden or home to a farmers market was ranked the most feasible, and second most important.

Plans to add recreational activities or public housing were the lowest-rated, but organizers said none of the ideas had been discarded and the planning and brainstorming process will continue this fall. "This is guidance," said Mary Kane, the consultant who organized the rating process. "Nothing is off the table."

The center's newest buildings are easily seen from the road, but the oldest parts aren't in public view.

When Dave Kolar, a security officer at the center, drove down a dirt road into the woods that cover the eastern part of the land, there were no cars or people within earshot.

"We've got a real overpopulation of deer," Kolar said. "Everybody says we've got coyote, but I haven't seen one."

He pulled up to a clearing where there was a small, abandoned amphitheater - a handful of wooden benches facing a small brick platform, with an overgrown outhouse behind them.

In the 1940s and 1950s, he said, the center's younger residents would walk in the woods and attend nature talks. Nearby, a signboard with faded drawings of animals found in the woods, such as racoons, was tilted and rusting.

None of the amenities or the nature trails nearby, Kolar said, have been actively used by the Stockley Center in decades.

Neil Stevenson, whose 33-year-old son has developmental disabilities, made the case for a center that still focuses on helping people like his son and their families.

"It's not free land - oh, boy, what can we do with it," he said at the meeting. "It has been sacrificed by this silent group of people because of federal law, because of progressive social thought, putting them in the community."

Contact James Fisher at 983-6772, on Twitter @JamesFisherTNJ or jfisher@delawareonline.com.