



Van H. Wanggaard

Wisconsin State Senator

NOTE – In the morning of Thursday, November 21, 2024, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel printed a story which stated that Republicans lack of action on a proposed Administrative Rule related to juvenile corrections was the cause of the Lincoln Hills School not being closed.¹

In response, Senator Wanggaard sent the attached column to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel for publication. In the afternoon of Friday, November 22nd, JSOnline updated their story. They have refused to run the column correcting the record.

Journal Sentinel Wrong to Blame Rule and Legislature for Lincoln Hills

The JSOnline story “Republican lawmakers again delay plan to close Lincoln Hills youth corrections complex” is so factually wrong, that I am compelled to correct the record. The story claims that because Administrative Rule (“Rule”) governing youth facilities hasn’t been approved, and has been delayed, that is the reason Lincoln Hills is still open.

Let me be clear - Lincoln Hills can close without the Rule being in place. Period. Full Stop. End of Story. Governor Evers knows this. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel knows this.

Any suggestion otherwise is false. It’s a borderline lie. There is absolutely zero relation between the rules being adopted and Lincoln Hills being open or closed. Zero.

Yes, the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety took our time with the Administrative Rule. The Administrative Rule mirrors in many regards the court-enforced consent decree resulting from horrific conditions at the prison. In some regards, the Rule was far more restrictive on staff than the consent decree.

As a result, my committee held public hearings in Madison and Merrill about the conditions at Lincoln Hills and the Rule. We heard complaints on and off the record about the working conditions that are in place at Lincoln Hills. The murder of Youth Counselor Corey Proulx brought forth even more complaints about how the Rule and consent decree handcuffs staff and inmate safety at Lincoln Hills.

For the last several months, I have worked with Corrections Secretary-Designee Jared Hoy to improve the rules. Where the Rule went too far in my committee’s belief, we reined it in. Where

¹ Print Banner headline: “Lincoln Hills Delays Persist; Troubled youth prison’s closure stalled by GOP, JSOnline headline: Republican lawmakers again delay plan to close Lincoln Hills youth corrections complex

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the Rule could lead to confusion, we made it workable. Where we needed clarification, we got it either through conversation or changes. As a result, the Rule is in a much better place than it was when it was introduced.

But again, this is not why Lincoln Hills isn't closed. That falls on Governor Evers.

Less than two months into office, in February of 2019, – [Governor Evers sought the indefinite postponement of closing Lincoln Hills.](#)² Even though it didn't become law, he continued that policy.

Governor Evers and I both served on the committee that choose the sites for the Lincoln Hills replacement facilities. The committee considered over 70 sites, and unanimously settled on two. One was to be in Hortonia, the other in Milwaukee at 73rd and Mill Road.

You can imagine my shock when Governor Evers – on his own – decided to ignore the committee on which he served, and [selected a site the committee hadn't even considered in Milwaukee](#), 1,000 feet from a school.

It didn't just shock me and Evers' fellow siting committee members. The residents nearby were shocked. The mayor of Glendale was shocked. Milwaukee leaders were shocked. And why wouldn't they be? Three months after selecting a site in Milwaukee, Evers just said, "Never mind, just kidding!"

The bait and switch Evers pulled caused outrage in the area. Given that outrage, and Evers' refusal to consider a different site, the Legislature declined to fund building a replacement facility in 2019 without a viable plan.

Governor Evers would ignore the idea of closing Lincoln Hills for the next three years. It wasn't until 2022 that Governor Evers decided on a suitable location for a new prison on Milwaukee's north side. Ironically, the site where the prison is being built is very close to the site that our siting committee had previously selected.

In the last budget, Evers asked for \$80 million for a "back of the napkin" plan for another youth prison in Dane County. Responsible legislatures don't fund "back of the napkin" plans – especially not \$80 million ones. They fund actual plans. So, the Legislature authorized funding for planning for a new youth prison in Dane County, instead.

² Note – the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel didn't report on this fact until June.
<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2019/06/11/tony-evers-says-closing-teen-prison-july-2021-may-impossible/1422063001/>

With the opening of youth facilities in Racine and Milwaukee in 2025 and 2026, there will be likely be fewer than a dozen kids left at Lincoln Hills. Probably only a handful. When presented with this information in April at a committee hearing about the Rule, [the Department of Corrections admitted that there is no plan to close Lincoln Hills anytime in the immediate or near future.](#)

The Journal Sentinel knows all of this. They printed the stories. They received my, and others', press releases. They've followed the process. Instead, they ignore facts and blame the Legislature.

Time and again, the Legislature has insisted that Lincoln Hills be closed. When presented viable plans, not half-baked ones from left field, the Legislature has funded them. As I have demonstrated, the delays come almost entirely from Governor Evers. And none of this has anything to do with the Rule that is being reviewed and not rubber stamped.