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IN OUR OPINION

Lake County's lock out

Officials wrong to keep public in dark about boot camp plans

In their hasty and successful effort to get a boot camp for teen-age felons, local officials in Lake County let arrogance be their guide. They kept the public in the dark until the outcome was settled on the biggest, most important project to come along in that county in years.

The camp is to be in Webber Township, just north of Baldwin. The first public hearing on the idea was held Aug. 28, two weeks after final approval by the Webber Township Board. In all, the board and the Lake County Board of Commissioners voted five times in one month in support of the camp with little or no attempt to inform the public or seek comment.

All of the votes took place at legally conducted public meetings, but regular township and county meetings are sparsely attended. Webber Township took an additional step to avoid questions and criticism by holding special meetings while refraining from its usual practice of advertising the special meetings in a local weekly newspaper. The only notification was a sheet of paper posted on a wall at the township hall.

It's understandable that Lake County officials wanted to move quickly. The State Department of Corrections made it clear that the first community with an acceptable bid would get the 480-bed boot camp, and several other counties also were working on proposals. As the poorest county in the state, Lake County could benefit greatly from the 300 jobs and \$16 million payroll that will be generated by the boot camp. Lake County and Webber Township officials would have been remiss in not trying to get the boot camp.

Despite the obvious benefits of the so-called "punk prison," both the county and township had an obligation to follow not just the letter of the Open Meetings Act, but the spirit. An issue as important and controversial as building a prison demands a full accounting to the public and ample time for citizens to react.

The boards of Webber Township and Lake County should go back now and do that, setting aside their decisions until ample public notice and review have been provided. State authorities should give them the time. The prison is important for Lake County but not more important than respecting the people who live there.