

Feds drop proposal to house undocumented immigrant youths at Grand Island resort

By [Jerry Zremski](#) | News Washington Bureau on June 23, 2014 - 8:00 PM

WASHINGTON – It's official: the former Grand Island Holiday Inn will never be known as the "Byblos Niagara Resort and Spa for Undocumented Alien Children."

Three days after government agents mistakenly inspected the fully occupied and newly renovated Byblos Niagara as a possible temporary home for young immigrants crossing into the U.S. from Mexico, the Department of Health and Human Services announced Monday that the Grand Island facility and another in Rochester are no longer under consideration for that purpose.

Fatima A. Cuevas, deputy undersecretary for legislation at HHS, announced the decision in an email to congressional offices.

"We have learned that the assessment of the Byblos Niagara Resort in Grand Island, N.Y., and The Lexington Commerce Center in Rochester, N.Y., conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the General Services Administration found that the facility would not meet our requirements for the unaccompanied children effort," Cuevas wrote. "Consequently, we will not pursue that site further."

Apparently, then, the government's requirements for housing those unaccompanied children do not include the amenities the Byblos Niagara lists on its website, which include a sauna, a whirlpool, a riverside restaurant and a cocktail lounge.

Scott Swagler, the hotel's general manager, said Friday that the government inspectors arrived at his facility unannounced, expecting to find a vacant hotel rather than a resort that's pretty much booked through the summer and is in the midst of a renovation that will cost up to \$10 million. The agents left acknowledging a mistake had been made, apparently because a local developer had recommended the site to the government.

Local members of Congress were relieved, if not surprised, to learn that the Byblos Niagara Resort and Spa would not soon be home to some of the 52,000 unaccompanied children who have fled strife in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala by illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border this year.

"The federal government's handling of this situation was irresponsible and inexcusable," said Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat whose district includes Grand Island. "A little due diligence would have made it clear that this site is inappropriate, preventing unnecessary confusion and concern in the community. The decision to exclude this site from consideration is the right one and no surprise to those who live here and are familiar with the property."

Rep. Chris Collins, R-Clarence, agreed with Higgins but went one step further, blaming the snafu on the Obama administration and its immigration policies.

“Anyone with access to the Internet would have known the Byblos Resort was not a option to house undocumented immigrants,” Collins said. “Now that it has confirmed that a spa and resort is no place to house these undocumented minors, the Obama administration should forget any future plans to send illegal immigrants to Western New York. The president needs to stop incentivizing criminal behavior by refusing to enforce the current immigration laws on the books.”