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Compromise is considered for bill on housing retarded

By Sam Newlund
Staff Writer

The Perpich administration's plan to move 1,300 retarded people out of state hospitals the next six years appears all but doomed.

But don't rule out a smaller number, at least 800 and possibly many more. Advocates of opposing notions about the future of the state hospital system are beginning to smell compromise.

And one of the ironies of the debate, which features key actors in the compromise, lies in the Senate and House sponsorship of the administration's bill.

Sen. Donald Samuelson of Brainerd and Rep. Paul Ogren of Aitkin treated the Department of Human Service's plan with undisguised disdain a few months ago.

Now Samuelson and Ogren, both DFLers, are the bill's sponsors.

Samuelson, the powerful chairman of the finance division that handles human services, had been regarded as the plan's Enemy No. 1, partly because his district includes a state hospital. Two months ago he professed "absolutely no faith" in a departmental promise to protect hospital employees.

Ogren, House chairman of Health and Human Services, said the same day that his committee is under no obligation to hear the department bill. "We've got a big circular file," he said.

An amused Charles Schultz, the department's deputy commissioner, promptly sent Ogren an old wastebasket. It's still in Ogren's office — empty.

But is this a total flip-flop? No, both say they still have strong reservations about the department's plan, especially Samuelson. But both predict a



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compromise bill will pass this session.

It's a prediction that few would have made last fall while negotiators for interest groups continued wrangling outside the Legislature over the department's plan.

The prediction assumes that the money will be there, and competition for state money is fierce. The department's plan would cost an extra \$21 million the next two years.

There's another irony: Samuelson and Ogren are chief sponsors of both the department's bill and another one — the one it will have to meet halfway if compromise is achieved. Under this setup the two chairmen are in a better position to control the outcome as sentiment shifts in one direction or another.

The rival bill was drafted by representatives of five hospital communities. It keeps a far greater number of retarded people in the institutions than the department bill, and it gives the hospitals, now called regional centers, greater control over the delivery of services to the retarded, mentally ill and chemically dependent in their regions.

The community bill also gives relatives a veto over the unwanted movement of a regional center resident into the community.

The action now unfolding in the Legislature was launched early last year

when Human Services Commissioner Sandra Gardebring set up meetings among "stakeholders" in the hospital system with its dwindling population. More than 30 interest groups failed to agree on everything, but many issues were narrowed, and only nine groups dissented from the department's plan.

The department bent a lot, too. When its bill reached the Legislature, it called for just 95 retarded people remaining in the regional centers by mid-1995. Small community homes are better than big hospitals, the theory goes, although others hotly disagree. The state would run its own network of group homes and day programs.

The community bill would keep either 515 or 635 regional center beds for the retarded, depending on how some beds are counted. If the communities could succeed with such numbers, it would be a hedge against one of their fears: the closing of an institution. Samuelson says the department would do just that if it could.

"The community bill is still my bill," he said Friday. If he could set a moratorium on further migration from the hospitals, he said, he would do it. But he called that unrealistic.

Why has he softened his tune? He began being persuaded by the position the communities took. The communities had seen the handwriting on the wall: They had to head off the departmental plan or be buried.

Neither Samuelson nor Ogren would guess on the eventual numbers. Neither would Schultz. But all three talked of compromise.

One thing is clear: The negotiations — something new in state decision-making — were not a waste of time. The results *do* carry weight with legislators.