

Proposed shelter locations raise questions

The Town Council will discuss options March 23.

By Matt Dees, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL — Some area residents are saying the proposal to move the Inter-Faith Council men's shelter out of downtown is a bad idea, though the head of the local charitable organization said he's keeping his options open.

Town Manager Cal Horton, in a recent e-mail to the mayor and council, identified two potential sites for the shelter, both owned by the town.

One is the 90-acre site of the town's new public works hub, known as the Town Operations Center, off Eubanks and Millhouse roads in the northern part of town.

The other is land adjacent to the Chapel Hill Memorial Cemetery off Fordham Boulevard.

Town leaders, IFC officials, church representatives and business owners make up the committee on homelessness that will discuss the options at a March 23 meeting at Amity United Methodist Church.

Ruby Sinreich, a town planning board member, and Rick Kennedy, a resident near one of the proposed new shelter locations, oppose the move, but for different reasons.

Kennedy said the town is dumping "all the things it needs but doesn't want" near his Blackwood Mountain Road home close to the operations center.

Garbage trucks, buses, impounded vehicles and other heavy-duty equipment all will be housed at the 90-acre site and rumble past Kennedy's home, he said. Officials are looking to earmark more than \$50 million next fiscal year for the public works project.

Kennedy's small neighborhood is outside the town limits but is subject to town regulations as a part of Chapel Hill's extraterritorial jurisdiction.

"This is just one more thing," he said. "They can get away with it because we can't vote in Chapel Hill elections. It's just not fair."

Asked if being incorporated into the town, which would bring with it Chapel Hill property taxes as well as voting privileges, would be more fair, Kennedy said "maybe a little."

He added, "We wouldn't have enough votes to do anything about it, though. They're going to do what they want to do."

Sinreich sees the issue as one of morality.

"I think we need to think about what message we're sending when we tuck people away, out of sight, out of mind," Sinreich said.

She recalled seeing a homeless man across the street from the IFC shelter this week, hugging a brick wall.

"That's a real reminder to us that these people need help," Sinreich said. "I look at that, and I say, 'We need to give the IFC a lot more money.'"

"We really need to not hide these parts of our community that are scary and painful for us."

Downtown business owners have complained that the presence of the shelter fosters panhandling and other disruptive behavior.

But Chris Moran, executive director of the IFC, said pinning such problems solely on the shelter is wrong.

He noted that some panhandlers have no affiliation at all with the shelters.

“It’s nonsense for people to keep coming up with those assumptions,” he said.

That said, Moran is open to the idea of relocating because the shelter needs more space.

The men’s shelter now also serves as the food pantry and kitchen. Moran would like the men’s shelter to be freestanding, with different wings to serve different needs.

“It would be nice to have incentives for men to move from one level of service or another,” he said.

One benefit of the downtown locale, both Moran and Sinreich pointed out, is its proximity to town services, such as bus transit.

“Wherever we’re located, services need to be accessible,” Moran said. “We don’t want to be in a foreign country somewhere where people are marginalized.”

Kennedy said that concern would be realized if the shelter were relocated to Eubanks Road.

Moran said the issue of location, in many ways, is secondary to finding a solution to the larger problem of homelessness.

That will take contributions from all segments of society, he said, from charitable workers to business owners to the homeless people themselves. The committee, Moran said, with its disparate make-up, is a good start.

“The issue is how we end homelessness in the community and how we engage individuals in owning the problem,” Moran said.

“IFC doesn’t own this problem, and IFC can’t find all the answers to this problem. If everyone wants homeless folks to become independent and not be homeless anymore, then everyone has to be involved in looking at these issues.”

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