

Board Rejects Request for Transitional Housing

CARL ROTENBERG

Times Herald Staff

07/15/2008

NORRISTOWN - There will be no transitional housing ministry for up to 14 men at the Haws Avenue United Methodist Church parsonage on West Marshall Street.

The Zoning Hearing Board Monday night unanimously rejected a requested variance at the conclusion of two nights of often, impassioned testimony both for, and against the proposal.

More than 20 opponents of the homeless housing plan criticized the burden of homeless men in their residential neighborhood, inadequate planning by church officials and the need for major structural renovations.

Five persons, including a Norristown town watch organizer and a fair-housing advocate, supported Rev. Tracy L. Bass' plan for a "transitional housing ministry" that would use volunteer supervisors 24-hours-per-day, drug and alcohol testing, criminal background checks and random testing to insure safety for neighbors.

More than 14 Norristown residents and six municipal officials spoke against the requested variance with fire safety, building code, police and legal arguments.

The board ended testimony after a three-hour hearing Monday night that followed a contentious, June 24 hearing that was continued to complete testimony from nearby neighbors.

Fire Chief Thomas O'Donnell said the three-story parsonage at 818 W. Marshall St. and the attached church would require a full sprinkler system, smoke alarm system, exit fire escapes from upper floors and renovated entranceways to accommodate a residential use for the parsonage.

"The change in use makes it an R-3 (residential) group home which requires sprinklers throughout and the fire detection system," O'Donnell said. "It is going to negatively impact the community."

Yerkes Associates Building Code Official Tom Kelly said the available space would only allow 11 persons (10 residents and one volunteer supervisor) rather than the church's proposed 14 residents and one supervisor.

"Twenty percent of the full renovation cost would have to be spent on accessibility requirements like more exits, accommodations for wheelchairs and blind persons and fire escapes," Kelly said.

A common support wall shared by the church and parsonage would require sprinklers and smoke alarms in both buildings, he said.

Police Chief Russell J. Bono said "walking" students en route to Stewart Middle School would walk past the parsonage.

"I have serious concerns about the background checks and how involved they will be," Bono said. "Most of the clients have underlying issues with drugs, alcohol or a criminal background."

Bono said the homeless housing would have "an overall negative effect on public safety." Norristown Solicitor Sean Kilkenny, representing municipal council's opposition to the homeless housing, said the church's attorney, Philip Newcomer, had not "proved a hardship" for the variance requested.

"We're not under any obligation to grant this," Kilkenny said. "We have a zoning district that allows this."

Doris Starks, the town watch organizer, said "homelessness was a very big issue in Norristown. We need facilities for the homeless."

"We see homeless on DeKalb Street, at the (Norristown) Transportation Center, at the McDonald's," Starks said. "It's up to us to start doing something."

Elizabeth Vazquez, the enforcement coordinator at the Fair Housing Rights Center in Glenside, said that "NIMBY (not in my back yard) was often based on stereotypes."

"Affordable housing does not adversely affect housing values," Vazquez said. "This has the potential to improve Norristown."

Vazquez said there was "nothing like this proposal" in the Norristown area or Norristown.

Donna Windle, an assistant director of the Coordinated Homeless Outreach Center (CHOC) at Norristown State Hospital, which houses homeless families, said that "homeless shelters were used for emergency situations" and that "transitional housing is for the next step."

Under the church's plan, CHOC would have been one source for residents who would have spent up to two years in the transitional housing.

"The men we've been working with don't need intensive case management," Windle said. "They need a step up."

Councilman Gary Simpson and William Caldwell spoke against the variance. Former Councilwoman Olivia Brady said church officials made no provisions to properly train the volunteers who would supervise the men.

"If we passed this we would be setting a precedent," Brady said. "It does not help the welfare of the community."

Haws Avenue resident Bill Ward said that two unofficial halfway houses were already operating on his block without municipal sanction and that he was the only homeowner left on a block of rental properties.

"I pick up empty cocaine packets on my doorstep every morning," Ward said. "While we sat here tonight there were two police incidents at the halfway house."

"Pastor Bass is putting his volunteers in a dangerous position. Is this fair," said Aleksandra Eigen. "We will

not protest if the pastor and his family will move to the house and invite a few people from CHOC to live with them."

Bass resides in the church's West Norriton parsonage. An assistant pastor had lived in the Norristown parsonage at 818 W. Marshall St. more than 10 years ago. The building is currently used for Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings four evenings and one morning each week.

Zoning board chairman Andre Hayes said the board did not need an executive session to reach a decision.

"The applicant did not establish a hardship," Hayes said. "After hearing the testimony there wasn't much board deliberation necessary."

Carl Rotenberg can be reached at crotenberg@timesherald.com or 610-272-2500, ext. 350.