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Council OKs shelter's move to Queensgate

Written by Jane Prendergast

City Gospel Mission got the OK on Wednesday to move to Queensgate, but businesses that don't want the shelter as a neighbor might take the city to court.

Cincinnati City Council voted 7-2 to approve an ordinance overriding the current zoning on the new Dalton Street site where the mission, now in Over-the-Rhine, wants to move so it can expand its homeless shelter and addiction recovery programs. The vote contradicted recommendations from the city's buildings and planning department, which advised against zoning exceptions.

Council voted after being warned about a possible lawsuit by Peter Koenig, a lawyer representing Queensgate businesses. He sent a letter to City Solicitor John Curp on Tuesday that asked Curp to file a taxpayer lawsuit to stop what the business owners believe is illegal spot zoning and abuse of power by council. Such a letter is a necessary precursor to, if the business owners would win a suit, also winning attorney's fees.

Curp declined, but said he stands ready to help with any talks between the businesses and the mission. A lawsuit would be premature, he told Koenig in a letter, because it would sidestep the zoning appeals process.

Koenig said late Wednesday he did not yet know if his clients would decide to sue.

"Unlike the city," he said, "we are not rushing to any judgments."

The measure passed with no discussion. Two council members dissented: Republicans Leslie Ghiz and Wayne Lippert. Lippert said he and his family have

been long-time supporters of the mission, but he voted against it because of the businesses' concerns and safety issues.

"I think there might have been better places for it - like the old jail site on Linn Street," he said. "Also the proximity to businesses, to the (Cincinnati) museum center. And also the safety of the (clients). Them being in that high foot traffic area, I think, is dangerous."

The move has support from the Cincinnati Center City Development Corp., which is redeveloping Washington Park, near the mission's current location, and the museum center. The center had opposed the move, but changed opinions after the mission agreed to around-the-clock surveillance and other safety measures.

The mission has been trying to move from its "landlocked and ill-equipped" site in Over-the-Rhine since 2003, spokesman Jason Williams said. Now officials plan to break ground this fall on a new 50,000-square-foot building on Dalton Avenue and York Street, together a 1.7-acre parcel. The project is estimated to cost \$7-\$8 million.

The mission will double its emergency shelter beds to 76 and double beds for its mens addiction program to 30. The additional space will allow also the mission to add daytime programs like recreation and resume writing, making the mission the first homeless shelter in Cincinnati to provide day programming. The project also will relocate the mission's administrative offices, The Lord's Gym and Jobs Plus.

The lack of daytime programs has been a complaint about the Drop Inn Center, where clients mostly leave the center during the day, prompting complaints about loitering and other problems around the shelter. More daytime programming is among the goals of a comprehensive new plan passed by council in 2009 to shift away from emergency beds to provide more transitional and supported housing for homeless people as well as more caseworkers.

Williams said mission officials hope to keep talking to the business owners just as they negotiated with the museum center.

"We really see them as our future friends and neighbors," he said. "We just want to let them know that we are going to be committed, good neighbors."

