

Driscoll: Give arts center a chance

By Tom Dalton

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SALEM — The Salem Mission recently announced a \$3 million plan to expand its housing for the homeless into the former St. Mary's Italian Church.

It has preliminary architectural drawings to convert the church into 20 studio apartments and last week was awarded a \$200,000 grant for the project. In many ways, it is well on its way.

What the Salem Mission doesn't have, however, is neighborhood support. Quite the contrary.

The Italian neighborhood around the site is upset about the Mission's homeless shelter on Margin Street, opposed to the housing expansion, and concerned about the religious murals and artifacts left in the vacant church that would have to be removed during construction.

They are so opposed that they recently formed a neighborhood group and, at a packed meeting at the Christopher Columbus Society, voted near-unanimous support for a counterproposal for the site: an arts center.

"People are really angry ... and that's something that has to be worked out, and that takes a lot of time," said Jeff Cox, a co-chairman of the new Endicott Street Neighborhood Association.

City Councilor Steve Pinto, who attended the meeting, said he was shocked to hear residents tell "horrifying" stories about public drinking, public sex, discarded drug paraphernalia and of being afraid to send their children to a neighborhood park — all problems residents blame on the shelter.

"I was blown away," Pinto said. "I had never attended a neighborhood meeting where I heard stuff like that."

In response, Pinto called for a City Council meeting tonight to air out the issue.

Mayor Kim Driscoll and state Rep. John Keenan, meanwhile, have met with both sides and are asking the Salem Mission to give the backers of the Salem Community Arts Center a chance to put a plan together to acquire the church.

The newly formed organization is headed by Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker who lives in the Italian neighborhood, and includes people active in other groups: the Salem Arts Association, Salem Sounds, Salem Film Fest, CinemaSalem, the Salem Theatre Co. and others.

They have proposed an arts center that would involve residents of the shelter through programs and jobs.

'A fair chance'

Driscoll said she and Keenan "feel like a little bit more time would be helpful to get the arts and culture (center) off the ground. ... They are really passionate about it, and they should be given some time to try to pull things together."

The Mission had given the arts group a June 15 deadline to make a cash offer for the church, a goal it did not meet, but many say that timetable was unrealistic.

"You've got to give these guys a fair chance, and 30 days or so wasn't a fair chance, especially in this economy," Keenan said.

Both Keenan and Driscoll, who have been strong supporters of the shelter, said the Mission should proceed with its funding applications and other building plans but also should leave a window open for the Salem Community Arts Center to come up with a firm proposal.

The Mission appears to be listening.

"I believe the board is willing to do that," said Mark Cote, executive director of the shelter. "... But we're moving forward with our application (for funding)" at the same time.

He struck a conciliatory tone about tonight's meeting.

"We're going to come to that meeting willing to listen and to make some concessions to the neighborhood," he said.

Cote said he wants people to understand that their goal is not to expand the number of homeless on site, but to put the "formerly homeless" into housing and to put itself out of business.

"As we build housing, we will reduce the number of shelter beds until there are no more shelter beds and there is no more shelter," he said.

'Blamed for everything'

However, Cote also said there is a lot of "misinformation" about what is happening on Margin Street.

"To blame every street person ... every person who's inebriated outside on the Mission is just not a logical thing to do," he said.

Cote said he didn't hear any of these complaints until the housing plan was announced.

Ward 3 Councilor Jean Pelletier, who represents the neighborhood, made a similar comment at a meeting last month at Salem police headquarters: "Let me be perfectly honest with you," he said. "I have not had a call about anything going on with the Mission."

Salem police, who have been working closely with the Salem Mission, said they went to the homeless shelter about 200 times last year, which was 100 fewer visits than the year before. "The calls for service are down," Patrolman Dennis King of the Community Impact Unit said at a recent meeting.

And a lot of those calls, according to Cote, are made by Mission staff asking police to remove troublemakers from the property.

That number is still "unacceptable," Pinto said, and a huge drain on city resources. "If I'm the Mission, I've got to step back and say, 'We've got to fix this little problem we have before we go forward.'"

Keenan said the Mission has been asked to put a neighborhood representative on its board and to set up a neighborhood advisory committee to deal with the problems.

Cox, the co-chairman of the neighborhood group, said he and others generally support the work of the homeless shelter but are troubled by the current state of affairs. The Salem Mission, he said, has to fix the existing problems, give the arts center a real chance and start listening to neighbors.

"We're asking for time and for dialogue," he said, "and we've had neither at this point."