

Mission gives arts group more time

By Chris Cassidy
STAFF WRITER

June 23, 2009 12:34 pm

SALEM — The Salem Mission said it will allow more time for supporters of an arts center to submit a formal proposal for the former St. Mary's Italian Church building, which the shelter hopes to transform into housing for the homeless.

The shelter announced several concessions during last night's City Council meeting, which was packed with a standing-room-only crowd of neighbors and former parishioners.

The Mission said it will extend the deadline it has given to organizers of an arts center — and any other interested parties — to pitch a proposal for the church until the Mission is granted state funding for its proposed housing project, expected to take between three and five months.

"This is not a commitment to sell the church," Mission attorney George Atkins said. "It is a commitment to genuinely consider a proposal."

The Mission also pledged to work more closely with neighbors, who have voiced a long list of complaints with the shelter and its plan to dramatically transform a former church with a storied history.

The shelter also said it will establish a neighborhood representative on its Board of Directors and set up a neighborhood advisory committee to deal with chronic issues in the area.

"We want that kind of constant communication so we can work with ... all the members of the community to solve whatever problems may exist," Atkins said.

The Mission has preliminary architectural drawings to convert the church into 20 studio apartments and has been awarded a \$200,000 grant for the project.

Meanwhile, supporters from the newly formed Salem Community Arts Center want to buy the building to turn it into a performing arts center. The Mission had set a June 15 deadline for receiving a "binding, unconditional, nonrescindable cash-at-close offer."

Last night, the shelter backed away from that deadline, after both Mayor Kim Driscoll and state Rep. John Keenan urged the Mission to give the arts group more time to put together a reasonable proposal. Though the Mission wouldn't name a selling price last night, the church has been assessed at \$500,000.

That uncertainty is frustrating, according to Joe Cultrera, who is heading the Salem Community Arts Center. It will be difficult to raise money for an arts center without knowing what the shelter would consider an acceptable selling price or whether they'd even sell at all.

"All they're saying is that they'll give it some consideration," Cultrera said.

Atkins, however, said the Mission is serious about entertaining offers.

"They want to have this dialogue with this group and other groups and keep the door open," Atkins said. "It's serious, and it's genuine."

Councilor-at-large Steve Pinto said the police responded to the Mission 240 times in the last year for disturbances at the shelter.

"It's a strain on city resources and affects a city budget that seems to get worse by the day," Pinto said.

But members of the Police Department's Community Impact Unit said they've received few complaints from the neighborhood and that much of the trouble is caused by a small group of about a half-dozen problem clients.

"From a law enforcement perspective, they're doing everything we've asked," Sgt. Harry Rocheville said.

The meeting lasted 3½ hours and sometimes grew tense. One resident brought in a bag of liquor nips and other bottles he claims to have collected while walking around the shelter neighborhood. Others cringed at the thought of losing a church full of old memories built by a wave of immigrants and modeled after a chapel in Assisi, Italy.

"Do you realize what you're saying" asked Paul Cultrera, a 94-year-old former parishioner. "That's a church. It's not a hall. That's what we Italian people suffered for years to build with our pennies, our gold, and our bodies and soul."

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A crowd of people listens in during a City Council meeting at Salem City Hall, where, last night, councilors met with representatives from Salem Mission and local neighborhood groups to discuss the issue of the Mission turning the former St. Mary's Italian Church building into a permanent housing unit for the homeless. Staff Photographer



Mark Cote, executive director of the Salem Mission, right, responds to a question from a city councilor. At left is George Atkins, attorney for the Mission. Staff Photographer



Salem Mayor Kim Driscoll voices her thoughts during a City Council meeting yesterday on the Salem Mission's plan to turn the former St. Mary's Italian Church building into housing for the homeless. Staff Photographer