

Homeless shelter's a no-show at meeting

By Tom Dalton

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SALEM — The already strained relations between the City Council and the Salem Mission, a private homeless shelter, got a little worse yesterday.

One month after it passed a resolution opposing the Salem Mission's plan to convert the former St. Mary's Italian Church into 20 apartments for the homeless, several city councilors said last night that they want to adopt a 10-year city plan to end homelessness.

Unlike the largely private process followed by the Mission, a city plan with broad community input would allow for public review and discussion, according to Councilor-at-large Joan Lovely, who chaired last night's committee of the whole meeting.

"There really is no public process (now) to allow the neighbors to weigh in," she said. "... They need a voice."

Lovely said she invited the Salem Mission to take part in last night's discussion but was turned down.

George Atkins, the shelter's attorney, said he advised his client not to go because he viewed the City Council action as "a pretense to further embarrass the Mission."

Atkins said the councilors did not invite the shelter to attend last month's meeting when the resolution condemning the housing plan was passed. He noted that many residents who oppose the shelter did attend.

"If Councilor Lovely were interested in a fair and balanced discussion of the Mission's (goals) and plans, it seems to me she would have invited us last month prior to her introducing a resolution," Atkins said.

"We've always been open, and the City Council knows we're more than willing to speak with them at any time. ..." he said. "I don't think I could put my client in the position of being attacked and (face) further attempts to be embarrassed."

Lovely said invitations aren't routinely sent to regular council meetings and added that she is certain shelter officials knew about the resolution plans because it had been discussed at several public meetings.

As for last night, Lovely said she called Atkins but didn't get a return call.

"There's no attempt to embarrass," she said after the meeting. "I think George is wrong to use that word."

While acknowledging that she and other officials are frustrated over what they see as a lack of public say over the shelter's expansion plans, Lovely said last night's meeting was not about the current plan but about any future plans and about the broader issue of coming up with a community plan to end homelessness in the city.

Citing the city of Lowell as an example, she said Salem needs to devise a 10-year plan that involves all segments of the community, not just one organization.

"It's good to see there's a partnership," she said of the Lowell plan, "which I feel is lacking here in Salem."

Mayor Kim Driscoll sent the councilors a memo last night informing them that there is a regional plan and that the Salem Mission took part last year in the adoption of "The Plan to End Homelessness on the North Shore." Mission Executive Director Mark Cote was listed a member of the committee that drafted that plan.

As a result of that effort, the state has made \$8.5 million available to support projects to prevent homelessness in this area, the mayor said.

Several elected officials and residents who spoke last night were critical of the Salem Mission for drafting its plan to expand housing without first meeting with local residents and officials.

"They want public funds but not public input," said Teasie Riley Goggin, a City Council candidate.

The Mission, Atkins said, is a private, nonprofit organization that owns the former St. Mary's Church, is allowed to come up with its own plan and is exempt from local zoning.

"This is a private organization," he said. "It's not a municipal agency."

Jessica Herbert, a member of the Historical Commission, which also opposes the plan to use the church, attended last night's meeting as a private citizen. She said a citywide plan with community backing might, in the long run, allow the Mission to expand its efforts and receive even greater public funding.

Councilors Lovely, Jean Pelletier and Steve Pinto said they plan to meet with Driscoll to discuss the 10-year plan.

Lovely said she also plans to hold another meeting and will extend another invitation to the shelter.

For the record, the Mission was not the only no-show last night. Driscoll, who said she had a conflict, Congressman John Tierney, Senate Majority Leader Fred Berry of Peabody and state Rep. John Keenan all were invited, Lovely said, but none showed up or sent a representative.

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