



One-stop social service center uncertain

By Scott Wartman • swartman@nky.com • February 27, 2010

COVINGTON - The city of Covington now owns the three-story warehouse where Stewart Iron Works has operated for decades, but must still determine how to turn that building into a complex for social services.

City Manager Larry Klein said the city will be able to use federal funds, tax credits and private investment to transform the building to house Covington's social service agencies.

Mayor Denny Bowman said the city doesn't have a plan to fund the estimated \$15 million project and should abandon the social service center concept for the site.

Stewart Iron Works continues to operate in the warehouse at 20 E. 18th St., but the city hired a relocation consultant with a \$19,000 federal grant to look for another location in the city to put the iron works.

The city bought the building in January for \$550,000, splitting the cost with the Kenton County Fiscal Court. Covington intends on converting the iron works into a "one-stop shop" for social services by relocating social services to the building.

Potential tenants have included the Emergency Cold Shelter of Northern Kentucky, Welcome House of Northern Kentucky and Kentucky One Stop Shop employment.

The plans have grown to include putting in a commercial kitchen for startup businesses to use. The city in 2008 rezoned the city to only allow social service agencies on this property.

"It meets a human need," Klein said. "A lot of the social services are at capacity. There is a proper place for these types of uses. That is why zoning exists, to put compatible uses together."

The building's tenants, however, remain uncertain. Welcome House of Northern Kentucky director Linda Young praised the one-stop shop concept. Welcome House provides social services for individuals and families that are homeless or at risk of being homeless.

"We are supportive of this," Young said. "It makes our services more effective for the clients."

Fairhaven Rescue Mission, however, has ambivalence toward the project. The non-profit Christian organization provides temporary housing for homeless men and a variety of care for needy men and women. Fairhaven is not opposed to moving closer to other social service agencies but doesn't want to move into a government-owned building because of concerns about the separation of church and state, said executive director David Hammers. Fairhaven is solely funded through private donations, he said. Fairhaven would consider buying property near Stewart Iron Works if the social service center comes to pass, Hammers said.

"Our mission, without apology, is faith-based," Hammers said. "Our donors are with us because

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of that. We see a conflict of being in the same building with the city."

How the city would fund a \$15 million renovation of the iron works concerns Covington's mayor. Bowman said the city commission has also talked about buying surrounding property to fit all the social services. The city, with declining payroll tax revenue, shouldn't be displacing businesses, he said. He said the city should focus on drawing more businesses to the area, including at the Stewart Iron Works site.

"I supported buying it. It only cost us \$275,000 to buy it," Bowman said. "We should have no problem getting our money back. We have got to get jobs in there."

Social services should not have been zoned out of their current locations, Bowman said. He wants to get the social services together and work out where they want to locate in the city.

"I want to bring them together so they can locate in commercial zoning," Bowman said. "They fit in a commercial strip. They are offices. They just help people in need."

Klein said the construction of a social service center will not require any city funds. The city has used its \$600,000 federal brownfield grant to fund the environmental studies and cleanup of the site, Klein said.

The iron works project received \$250,000 from a federal budget allocation to design the building. When local officials in March fly-in to Washington, D.C. to lobby for local projects, Covington will ask for \$4 million to fund this one, Klein said.

He said historic and new market tax credits and private funding will cover the renovation of the site.

"I think many people are on board for this," Klein said. "No one has proposed the city fund this project."

Bowman said he doesn't see this as enough to get the project done.

"You have got to stop relying on federal and taxpayer dollars to do this," Bowman said.

The city started this month meeting monthly with stakeholders interested in the project and will meet at the iron works site March 8 to take them through the building. Klein said the project will put more workers and payroll into the city coffers than what is currently on the site.

"In the next three to four months, a clearer picture will emerge," Klein said. "We don't have a playbook. This has never been done before."

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