

Shelter suffers another setback

Wake's Human Services Board rejects Raleigh's proposed site for a homeless shelter and votes to funnel funds into prevention.

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RALEIGH — The city's homeless shelter, which has operated on a temporary basis for more than six years, suffered another setback Thursday when the city and county failed to agree on a permanent site.

Wake County's Human Services Board, an advisory body, voted to reject Raleigh's site proposal. Board members said the Montgomery Green Building on South Wilmington Street, currently serving as a temporary shelter, sits on contaminated, flood-prone land and would cost more than \$5 million to renovate.

The Raleigh City Council had agreed to lease the Montgomery Green Building to the county at no cost for 20 years, provided the county operate a full-service homeless shelter there. The arrangement would have ended years of wrangling between the city and county over a shelter site.

But Philip Stout, the county's director of facilities design and construction, told the Human Services Board on Thursday that the cost of rehabilitating the city's building would far exceed the county's budget of \$2.7 million. Board members unanimously rejected the site.

The board's vote is not final. The Wake County Board of Commissioners will vote on the site at its Aug. 3 meeting, but Chairman Vernon Malone said commissioners likely will follow the human services board's recommendation.

"It seems kind of silly to me to take a dilapidated building that's in the flood plain and is an environmental hazard," Human Services Chairman Greg Patterson said just before the vote.

Human Services Director Maria Spaulding called the Montgomery Green building "a very sorry location" and said the county could build a shelter more easily on vacant land.

Raleigh City Council members said they were surprised and disturbed by the board's action.

"The disappointing part of this is that we were getting very close to meeting the needs" of the homeless, Councilwoman Stephanie Fanjul said.

Fanjul and other council members spent more than a year choosing the South Wilmington Street site. She said that city engineers found no evidence of contaminated soil and that early estimates for renovating the building "did not even approach \$5 million."

City Councilman Benson Kirkman said the city's renovation estimates

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were less than \$1 million.

Fanjul said a full-service county shelter would complement community initiatives such as The Healing Place, a planned treatment center for homeless men with substance abuse problems, as well as efforts to develop affordable housing.

But if commissioners follow Thursday's recommendations, Wake County may never operate a traditional homeless shelter.

After rejecting the site, board members voted to shift available funds into programs that would prevent homelessness rather than provide emergency shelter.

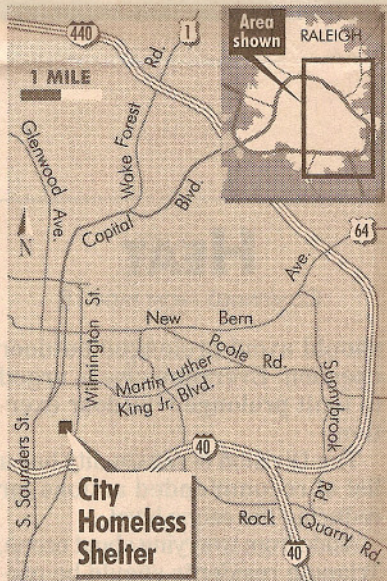
Wake County has more than 2,000 homeless people, officials estimate.

"We can get tough on homelessness," board member Barbara Goodmon said. "We're not doing anybody any favors with shelters and soup lines and no hope out there."

The board voted unanimously to endorse a plan that would funnel money into "strategies such as the Healing Place and permanent, affordable housing initiatives."

Details of the new strategy were sketchy Thursday, but the plan clearly left the operation of an emergency shelter to the city — a duty many city officials are not eager to accept. City council members said the homeless shelter, which serves all of Wake County, should be operated by the county.

"They're shirking their responsibility," Kirkman said. "We've been picking up their responsibility."



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Council members said they, too, support alternative programs for the homeless. But those programs do not erase the need for a traditional shelter. Many of the homeless are ineligible for affordable housing or unwilling to enter treatment programs, Fanjul said.

"I'm just terribly disappointed that they're turning their backs on this group of people," she said.

But if the county declines to take over the emergency shelter, the city has few options other than to continue operating it.

"Regardless of the stance the city takes, I'm unwilling to let people die in the street because we had a debate between the city and the county," Councilman Brad Thompson said.

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