

# City Officials Eye Site for Housing Homeless

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The site where Charlottesville's first studio-style apartment building for the homeless and working poor could be built is seen by some as ideal because it's close to services but detached from residential areas.

"There's so many ways that this site makes a lot of sense," said Mayor Dave Norris, one of the biggest backers of the single-room occupancy project in the city.

The site Norris referred to is near the intersection of Fourth Street Northwest and Preston Avenue, currently owned by Region Ten Community Services Board. Yet it might not be for long, and city officials and the nonprofit Virginia Supportive Housing are jumping at the chance to get the land to construct a 60-unit building designed to get homeless people off the streets.

The Fourth Street Station, at 401 Fourth St. NW, was put on the market to help Region Ten cut costs and to consolidate services, according to Executive Director Robert Johnson. The mental health provider just last month cut 11 jobs to cope with expected state budget cuts.

"The Fourth Street property was too small for our services," Johnson said. Those services included outpatient operations and treating those with substance addiction and abuse issues. Those operations have now moved to Region Ten's Peterson Building on Preston Avenue.

"We felt for some time that we needed to consolidate services for the betterment of our consumers," he said.

Norris has lauded the possible site as a good fit — close to transit, not in a residential neighborhood, relatively affordable and large enough for the facility, he said.

Additionally, many of the individuals who used to frequent that building for Region Ten's services are people who may be put up in this new building.

"I'm thrilled that the site has become available," Norris said.

Development of the entire SRO project is estimated to cost about \$8 million, and at the City Council's meeting last month, city attorney Craig Brown said the housing nonprofit was looking to buy the Region Ten property for \$1.5 million. The City Council has committed \$500,000 to Virginia Supportive Housing to assist in purchasing a site, and the organization is seeking other assistance from surrounding localities.

Norris said he was not opposed to putting such a facility in a residential neighborhood, but those involved with the project acknowledged that that could be an uphill battle because of resident concerns.

"It has to be something the locality is OK with," said Alice Tousignant, VSH's executive director. "In the end, that's the most important thing."

The closest neighborhood to the potential SRO site is the Starr Hill neighborhood, bordered by the three commercial corridors of Preston Avenue, West Main Street and Ridge-McIntire.

Though he said the neighborhood is removed from where the facility could go, neighborhood association president Ray Masters said that it is bound to lower property values wherever it ends up.

“Don’t tell me that putting a bunch of homeless or transitional people next to a residential neighborhood won’t affect the homes in proximity,” Masters said, adding, “I’m against the SRO idea anywhere in the city.”

Norris defends the Fourth Street land as being far enough away from Starr Hill, so it would likely not spur a fight between residents and the city about whether it would change property values or raise safety concerns.

“If this site works out, it’s going to be a big relief to not have to worry about that,” Norris said.

Apart from its initial capital, annual operational costs are expected to run around \$470,000, and the city hopes that Albemarle County and Region Ten will be able to contribute Section 8 vouchers — which allows very-low income families to lease private rental housing by assisting with costs — to help keep rent low. Norris said that Albemarle officials have orally agreed to provide vouchers, and the city hopes to get between eight and 15.

“Everything that’s been discussed has been completely verbal,” said Ron White, director of the county’s Office of Housing.

White said the county is authorized to have 429 housing vouchers, but it has enough federal funding to only finance between 360 and 380.

“We’re not getting enough money from HUD now to fund the vouchers we have,” White said, referring to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. That makes setting aside vouchers for particular projects difficult, he said, but the chairman of the county Board of Supervisors, David L. Slutzky, said there is near unanimous support among supervisors for backing the SRO once a request has been presented to them.

“We talked about doing that,” he said.

Norris noted the land situation is still hypothetical because talks are ongoing. No formal agreements have been signed, and Tousignant said the sale is still being discussed.

Despite VSH’s and the city’s interests, Johnson added that there is more than one party still looking at the site.

“We are not in final negotiations with anyone,” he said.