

Community asked to support women's transition to new life

The renovation of a vacant building may help ReLeasT prison ministry assist more women in rebuilding their lives.

The Nebraska City Planning Commission approved a conditional use permit Wednesday for the ReLeasT prison ministry's expansion of its transitional living program as it moves to the former Midwest Construction building on north 22nd Street.

The ministry, which started five years ago with Nebraska City musicians visiting prisoners and leading faith-based services in the state's maximum security prisons, accepted its first residents in April of 2010.

Ministry leader Steve Collins said there will be room for up to five women at the new location, as well as quarters for Collin's family and a live-in staff member.

The 82-year-old building, historically known as a hospital and nursing home, is being updated for modern fire and building codes. Marty Cozad, a general contractor from Nebraska City, said exterior improvements are also planned for what the ministry calls the LifeHouse.

The prospect of having women, many who are on parole or probation, move into the neighborhood prompted several questions from neighbors.

Sarah Draeger said she is worried that the non-profit organization would not be able to finish remodeling once it started and said she is cautious about how the new residents will safely fit into the neighborhood. "I'm not trying to stand in judgment of anyone. I'm just trying to get some clarification for my concerns," she said.

Collins said residents are carefully screened by state agencies before placed in the home. Once at the LifeHouse, they must follow a daily schedule and meet program expectations or they are transported back to the referring agency without delay. He said the women are mentored in the community. They are required to seek employment, work, volunteer and progress toward self-sufficiency through the faith-based program.

Bill Moore said his law enforcement work in the military taught him the unfortunate reality of how difficult it can be for people to get their lives back on track and urged citizens to help ReLeasT. "They can not do this in isolation. It only really functions when it's in a society and in a community," he said. "We need as many people as we can get that are willing to do the work they are doing."

Devin Santana of Nebraska City Iron Works, who purchased the property, said ReLeasT has the finances to complete renovation. He said when the building is updated he expects to deed it over to the ministry.

Zoning Administrator Dan Giittinger said the property is zoned residential office, which allows multiple-family and non-profit uses. It does not, however, support single-family residences.

He said since the Collins family will be making the building their residence, it was brought before the commission for a conditional use. City planners approved the permit for one year with the stipulation of no more than five women at a time.

Pastor Jeff Kelley of the First United Methodist Church told city planners he had been involved with similar transition house in Nashville, Tenn. He said the house had 15 people, but did not become a problem for its neighbors. He said the program Collins has put together makes it tough for the women to stay at the house, but it is having success. "I think the support in this community is very strong for this ministry," he said.

Frances Beaver, a LifeHouse resident who recently received a promotion at her Nebraska City job, said she was helpless and hopeless when she arrived. She said the structure and people helped her find peace and peace of mind. "It can change lives. It saved mine," she said.

Questions at the hearing also pertained to how the house would impact property values. Janet Palmtag said it is a benefit for the neighborhood to have re-investment in the building compared to having it sit vacant and continue to deteriorate. "It's thrilling someone is investing in it," she said.

Collins said the building will also be used for band practice, worship service and Bible study.

"We want the community to be a part of us just as much as we want to be a part of this community," Collins said.

Neighbors Tim Minderman and Justin Shores offered support for the LifeHouse and Diane McNeely said while she worries about the traffic hazards of having increased pedestrian activity she knows there is a need for transitional living.

"I would have trouble holding my head up to the Lord if I said not across from me," she said.

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