

Sleep-off center faces closure without re-zone Hearing Oct. 15

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

The Diagnostic Screening Center in downtown Anchorage, better known as the city's "sleep-off center" for intoxicated individuals, may face closure.

A couple winters ago a drunk man froze to death in downtown Anchorage. As a result the mayor requested the establishment of an emergency sleep-off shelter near downtown to avoid the occurrence of this type of death again.

Now under Anchorage's current zoning codes, the center, which is classified as a type of hospital facility under the law, cannot legally stay open unless zoning codes in that area are changed.

The center is located right behind the Brother Francis Shelter, a place where homeless people who are not intoxicated can stay until permanent residency is found, and near Bean's

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Cafe, a place where the homeless or poor can eat three hot meals a day.

Even though meals aren't purchased and a fee for a bed is not required, these places are considered to be businesses within this zone.

The center is located in a B-3 zone. Under this type of zone only businesses are allowed. The center is a hospital type facility because it is for inebriated people, and alcoholism is considered a disease.

Even though alcoholism isn't treated at the center, blood tests are taken to establish levels of intoxication.

The intoxicated individuals can stay there and sleep until alcohol levels come down to a level which is lower than when they arrived.

Dr. Ray Dexter, administrator at the Salvation Army's Clithero Center which oversees the center, said the average person who arrives has a blood alcohol level of 0.2. The maximum amount of alcohol in the blood permitted by the law is 0.1, which is legally drunk.

Dexter said the Salvation Army has a detoxification center at Point Woronzoff, but they don't have just a sleep-off center.

Although the Alaska Native Medical Center is just a half block up the hill, the Native hospital doesn't double as a sleep-off center for drunks and it's in a different zone.

The first two years the center was open under the mayor's health emergency code and was funded by a federal grant. Since then the grant has expired and the Municipality of Anchorage has taken over funding.

Dexter said the 32-bed facility sees more than 90 people every day, and 72 percent of those are Alaska Natives. He said of the 90 people, the average person stays at the center from six to eight hours. The police bring in about 5 percent of the people, Community Service Patrol brings in about 27 percent and about 63 percent are walk-ins.

"Usually an average person enters with a blood alcohol level of 0.2, and when they leave their blood alcohol level is about 0.1, which is legally intoxicated, but less intoxicated than when they arrived," Dexter said.

Dexter said center workers don't have the authority to hold anybody there unless they are incapacitated.

He said of the 72 percent Alaska Natives who go to the center, usually about half only show up there once.

"Maybe it's somebody from the Bush who's in town and goes out on a spree," he said.

The Fairview Community Council, which is opposing the location of the sleep-off center and which questions the effectiveness of the facility, doesn't want the zone to be changed.

Council President Celeste Benson said in spite of winter being on its way and the need for this type of facility, changing the zone is not a responsible action.

She said the council believes that public inebriates and homeless people should not be dealt with in the same manner or location.

Since Brother Francis Shelter and Bean's Cafe are next door to the sleep-off center, she feels this makes being drunk a convenience.

She said the people from the sleep-off center wind up going to Brother Francis and Bean's Cafe, which she said should be reserved for the homeless.

"If you look at the human aspect, the homeless is an issue that is a delicate emotional situation. Many of these people are mentally disturbed, and when you combine them with the public inebriate the atmosphere is not

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compatible," Benson said.

"Public drunks should be dealt with differently than the homeless. That's why public inebriates should be sent to Point Woronzoff, at the threshold of alcohol treatment."

Not only does the council want the facility out of their neighborhood, members question the merit of changing the zoning code.

"The city is not dealing with this thing properly by changing the zones," she said.

She said the city needs to look at the inebriate situation in Anchorage and make a long-term plan to start dealing with it.

Brian Saylor, manager of planning for the Municipality of Anchorage's Department of Health and Human Services, said deciding what to do is difficult.

He said the municipality plans to propose an amendment to the zoning ordinance to permit the sleep-off center in a B-3 zone.

Saylor said the Fairview Community Council doesn't want a sleep-off center in their neighborhood even though it's on the very edge of that

community and at least six blocks away from a residential area.

"The facility is very well used, and I'm sure it's kept people from freezing to death," Saylor said.

On the other hand, Saylor said the facility can also be called enabling to the inebriate.

"People can afford to get drunk, really drunk, and sleep it off in a warm place," he said. "So we're in an awkward position."

A meeting is going to be held Oct. 15 at 6:30 p.m. in the assembly chambers of the Lussac Library in Anchorage by the Anchorage Planning and Zoning Commission.