

Fairview seeks new services to aid drunks

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

Fairview residents say although they have opposed having a "sleep-off" center in their area, they favor opening a center where Anchorage drunks get services that will eventually help them become more productive members of the community.

That center may become a reality, if plans proposed by the Fairview Community Council are approved by the Anchorage Assembly.

The solution to Anchorage's street inebriate and homeless problem is a task which all community members must work on together, according to the Fairview Community Council.

The battle over who gets to take care of Anchorage's street drunks has been the topic of controversy for quite some time, and according to Celeste Benson, president of the Fairview Community Council, it's not over yet.

Problems arose nearly three years

• Multi-functional facility gets support

continued from page one

ago when the mayor ordered an emergency sleep-off center to be established as the result of an intoxicated man's death. The man fell asleep and froze to death in downtown Anchorage.

The center was built in the Fairview area close to downtown near the Brother Francis Shelter and Bean's Cafe for the homeless. Neither the shelter nor Bean's allows inebriates inside.

The Fairview community didn't like the idea of having the sleep-off center — officially called the Diagnostic Screening Center — in their neighborhood because they questioned its effectiveness to help inebriates. So, they tried getting it moved by saying that having it there was breaking the zoning code in the area.

The sleep-off center was operating under a federal emergency grant, and currently it's being funded by the Municipality of Anchorage.

Numerous meetings and hearings have been held to discuss ways to find a solution to get it moved or build another facility nearby.

The center was classified as a hospital facility over a month ago. Zoning codes do not allow such a facility, so the center was ordered to be shut down at the end of December.

Brian Saylor, planning manager for the city Department of Health and

Human Services, said the Anchorage Assembly and DHHS determined that the Fairview area is the most appropriate location for the new center.

He said the center is currently in a B-3 zone, and the area, in order to include the facility, will have to change to a Public Lands and Institutions zone. The PLI ordinance will then be revised to include a facility specifically for inebriates.

The proposed new facility will be located across the street from Brother Francis Shelter and Bean's Cafe and is expected to cost between \$3 and \$4 million dollars.

Dr. Ray Dexter, administrator at the Salvation Army's Clitheroe Center, said he is glad the Fairview Community Council has finally recognized the facility has to be in that particular area.

The Salvation Army currently manages the existing sleep-off center.

Although Dexter and Benson want the inebriates to ultimately seek treatment, Dexter said a multi-purpose facility as the one proposed, isn't the answer.

Dexter said the Clitheroe Center has both detox and treatment centers, but he said they are separate and 60 to 70 percent of the detoxing patients wind up seeking treatment after the detoxing process.

Dexter said it will defeat the purpose if the facility combines sleep-off beds, while people are trying to detoxify and yet others are being treated for alcoholism.

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—Celeste Benson

"How is sleep-off related to treatment?" he asked.

Dexter said he proposed a similar facility three years ago, but it was struck down under the same circumstances and the zoning wasn't changed.

Fairview Community Council's Benson said the problem could be solved if the whole city got involved. She said this is not just Fairview's problem, but everybody's problem. She said these people just hang out in Fairview because it's close to downtown.

She said the reason why the facility is going to be multi-functional is because just having a sleep-off center "recycles" the drunks.

"I just won't accept a sleep-off center," Benson said in an interview last week.

"A sleep-off center isn't good enough. We always wait until the last

minute to do something, and we wind up just applying a Band-Aid," she said about the on-going inebriate problem in Anchorage and the man who froze to death.

The facility will be a multi-purpose dwelling, and she stressed the facility's purpose won't be just to sober people up. It would give inebriates a chance to get out of their predicament by providing treatment and possibly even helping sober individuals seek employment.

"We do not think a sleep-off center is the way to take care of this problem," she said.

Although Benson and Dexter disagree on just how the facility should be structured, they both feel strongly that people must be provided services to prevent anyone from freezing to death.