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San Rafael board approves temporary homeless shelter



The vacant office building at 3301 Kerner Blvd. in San Rafael, Calif., on Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2020. Homeward Bound of Marin plans to use the top floor as a homeless shelter. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)

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San Rafael officials have issued a permit to Homeward Bound of Marin that allows the nonprofit to use part of an office building in the Canal neighborhood as a homeless shelter for the next year and a half.

Members of the city Planning Commission voted unanimously on Tuesday to approve the organization's permit request for 3301 Kerner Blvd. The permit allows Homeward Bound to use the top floor of the vacant three-story office building to provide emergency shelter for up to 45 people until April 30, 2022.

Homeward Bound's proposal does not require additional approval from city officials unless the Planning Commission's decision is appealed to the City Council by 5 p.m. Oct. 6, officials said.

Mary Kay Sweeney, executive director for the Novato-based homeless services organization, said Homeward Bound plans to use the site while renovating its 55-bed homeless shelter at 190 Mill St., which is also in the Canal neighborhood.

The San Rafael City Council approved the organization's plan to renovate the Mill Street site in April. Homeward Bound plans to demolish the one-story building, where it has sheltered the homeless since 1986, and build a four-story homeless services center in its place. The center will include 60 emergency shelter beds and 32 low-income apartments. Construction is set to begin this month and is expected to wrap up in about a year, according to Sweeney.

Homeward Bound initially applied for a one-year permit to use the Kerner Boulevard site, but city officials extended it to 18 months to account for possible construction delays. After a year, the Planning Commission is set to review the permit and the timeline of the renovation project, officials said.

"We are thrilled to have found a place to be able to have a temporary shelter," Sweeney told the commissioners.

Two neighboring business owners told the commissioners they were concerned that having a shelter at the Kerner Boulevard site could bring more crime and trash to the area.

Milton Davis, who owns a business two doors down from the site, said he opposed Homeward Bound's plan. He said the commercial building was not designed to house dozens of homeless people.

"I'm just absolutely overwhelmingly upset with the homeless situation that we're living with already," Davis said. "It's already too much."

Bruce Livingston, who runs the nonprofit Alcohol Justice in a building next door to the site, said he wasn't against the proposal, but he was concerned that neighbors weren't given enough notice of Homeward Bound's plan. He said he wanted a chance to meet with the organization's directors to discuss "mitigation" for what a homeless shelter might bring to the area.

"We already have issues that might be related to people without housing," Livingston told the commission.

"Every morning there's something that has to be cleaned up, sometimes human waste, sometimes beer cans," he said. "Just the other day I saw evidence of crack cocaine use."

Paul Fordham, Homeward Bound's deputy executive director, said the organization will provide security and staff at all times. He said the issues raised by neighbors are all "pre-existing."

"If there's people urinating and defecating in the street, hopefully those are people we can get in the shelter and they don't need to be out in the street," he said.

Commissioner Samina Saude noted that Homeward Bound already operates a shelter in the Canal area, and the temporary site would have fewer beds than the Mill Street center.

"I don't think we're presenting new issues in the neighborhood," Saude said. "We're actually providing less beds in the same neighborhood."

Meanwhile, Marin County officials are considering a plan to buy the same office building at 3301 Kerner Blvd. and convert it into long-term housing for the homeless.

The county has [applied](#) for \$6.4 million in state funding for the project. County officials are in negotiations with the building's owners, according to LeeLee Thomas, a county planning manager. The state funding would come from Project Homekey, which provides grants for cities and counties to buy hotels, apartments and other buildings for homeless housing.

Ali Guidice, a senior planner for San Rafael, said Homeward Bound's plan to use the site as a temporary shelter is "completely separate" from the county's project.

Thomas said the county's project, which would provide 44 homes, would not conflict with Homeward Bound's. She said Project Homekey allows counties that are approved for grants to temporarily use the sites as emergency homeless shelters prior to transforming them into long-term housing.

The county has also applied for \$3.2 million in Project Homekey funding to buy the Americas Best Value Inn hotel at 1591 Casa Buena Drive in Corte Madera and create 19 homes for the homeless. Negotiations with the building's owners are ongoing, according to Thomas.