

Sullivan County delegates approve sober living facility purchase contingent on block grant

NEWPORT — The Sullivan County sober house project took a major step forward to fruition this week, as the county delegates authorized the county to purchase the former Eagle Times building at 19 Sullivan St. in Claremont for a substance-free transitional housing program for county inmates.

The county delegates voted unanimously, 9-0, on Tuesday to allow the county to acquire 19 Sullivan St., which plans to renovate the property into a short-term residential facility. The sober living facility would serve graduates of the Sullivan County Transitional Reentry and Inmate Life Skills (TRAILS) program, a 90-day program tailored for inmates whose crimes derive from struggles with substance abuse.

The county currently estimates the cost of total construction to be \$3,325,000, though Sullivan County Manager Derek Ferland told the delegates that this is likely an inflated estimate, since the project renovation has been scaled back from its original design. The county will have more accurate productions once the county brings on a project engineer.

The county and owner of 19 Sullivan St. have a purchase agreement of \$325,000 to acquire the former publication building. Officials estimate \$2,550,000 for the building renovation and \$450,000 for related fees and equipment (such as security cameras).

The county will fund the purchase and renovation with \$500,000 in current-year budget appropriations, a \$1.1 million from a community loan fund and \$1,725,000 in grants and donations. The latter consists of a \$500,000 community development block grant (CDBG), \$1.2 million New Hampshire Housing Authority grant and a \$25,000 donation from Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

Ferland said that the county aims for the program to maintain a residency of 25 men and women, with a possible maximum capacity “in the thirties.” Each resident will pay a monthly rent of \$100, which Ferland said will offset the facility’s operating costs and build up a capital or rainy day reserve fund.

However, the delegation’s vote added two conditions to approving the purchase.

One condition stated that all but two residents must be participants from a “qualifying Sullivan County program,” such as TRAILS or the county’s community partners TLC in Claremont or Headrest in Lebanon.

Sullivan County District 4 Rep. Gary Merchant requested the condition be added. While a personal support of the project, Merchant said he wanted to be sensitive to the concerns of

Claremont residents who worry the program could become flooded with high-needs people from other communities.

“It’s hard to go back to the community and say we’re going to do this project and ask them to support it, but then add that people will be coming from Merrimack and Rockingham,” Merchant said. “It’s just difficult to have a conversation with people then.”

Ferland said that concerns about “the busloads of people from Nashua and Manchester,[being posted] on social media” were unfounded, based on the county’s research of other sober living programs in the state.

“That [busing] is absolutely not going to happen,” Ferland said. “So if one person goes through our jail and treatment program happens to not be from Sullivan County, that is a million miles away from the proverbial ‘busloads of people getting dumped into Claremont.’”

Additionally only about 1% of Sullivan County’s inmates resided outside of the county at the time of their arrest, Sullivan County Corrections Superintendent Dave Berry told the delegates.

“We have enough people that are in our own community and we can partner with, who are already doing treatment in Sullivan County, we’re not looking to recruit people from other counties,” Berry said.

But Merchant said he was concerned that without narrowly defining the eligibility requirements to enter the sober house, the program could potentially attract people outside the county to enter the program through available county channels.

It took the delegates nearly 30 minutes to decide upon the language for this amendment. Many delegates agreed that residency is difficult to actually define, as even the state legislature has struggled with the topic when trying to create a state voting law for out-of-state students.

The delegates initially sought to limit residency strictly to participants of TRAILS or Sullivan County partner-programs, until Sullivan County District 1 Rep. Brian Sullivan pointed out the possibility of a Claremont resident returning home after completing an out-of-county program.

The delegates also added a condition that made the purchase approval contingent to the county receiving the CDBG.

Ferland said that the state Finance Authority has already announced the awarding of that grant to Sullivan County, though the award will not be official until the governor’s Executive Council votes whether to approve it, which is scheduled to take place on March 11.

County Commissioner Jeff Barrett told the delegation that the County Commission would not likely continue with the building purchase should the grant be denied.

“I can’t speak for the other commissioners, but if the CDBG funds don’t come, I don’t want to buy the property,” Barrett said. “I think [the grant] is a guarantee, we wouldn’t be having this

conversation if we thought it wasn't. But if something derailed that, I would pull my support and I have a feeling the other two commissioners would do the same.”

The Sullivan County Commissioners currently have a request posted seeking construction manager bids and expect to award a contract by April 6. The County plans to close on the property around the end of March, after the Executive Council's decision on the CDBG.