

Society hopes to build social housing for women

BY THERESA MCMANUS, THE RECORD JANUARY 15, 2011

The Elizabeth Fry Society is seeking public feedback about a plan that will allow it to expand its services.

The society is proposing to build a three-storey, mixed-used development at 273/275 Sherbrooke St. that would include 10 non-market housing units and a group child-care space licensed for 37 children. The building would be located next to the society's existing building, which is located at the corner of East Columbia and Sherbrooke streets.

"It provides very much-needed 10 additional supportive housing units for women and a daycare to meet the needs of the community and our staff," said Shawn Bayes, the society's executive director. "We have been a very good neighbour."

The Elizabeth Fry Society moved to its Sapperton location 15 years ago. The nonprofit society provides a variety of support services to women and children.

The Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver is holding a community meeting about the proposed project on Saturday, Jan. 15 from 1 to 4 p.m. and on Wednesday, Jan. 19 from 7 to 9 p.m. Both meetings are being held at Knox Presbyterian Church at 403 East Columbia St.

"This building will enable the society to retain its administrative office functions within the Sapperton neighbourhood, while also providing non-market housing and licensed child care," said a preliminary staff report to council. "Currently, the society is leasing office space at 237 East Columbia St.; however, this space is not adequately sized or affordable."

The staff report about the application stated the housing will consist of 10 units of social housing that would be long-term, independent housing for women. It would include studios, one- and two-bedroom units.

"All units will be adaptable, which will enable residents, many of whom will be in their 50s and 60s, to age in place," said the report. "Supervision and support will be available around the clock; however, these women must demonstrate an ability to live independently."

The child-care facility would include space for 12 infant/toddlers and 25 three-to five-year-olds. It would also offer care at non-traditional hours, including a night nursery, to accommodate shifts of Royal Columbian Hospital staff and others.

The society has a contract of purchase and sale in place for 273 Sherbrooke St. pending the rezoning application. The sites are currently zoned for single-family residential use, but the society is requesting a comprehensive district zoning in order to allow the project to proceed.

Bayes said the society has been leasing office space in Sapperton for \$140,000 a year, but will be giving that up and putting the money toward the new project, if it's approved. If the project proceeds, the new building would accommodate the daycare, the society's administration space and 10 units of long-term housing.

"We have a need for more non-market housing," she said. "We have nine suites in our existing building. They don't have washrooms in them. They have to walk down the hall. We have increasingly had a number of women of frail health. We had a woman we cared for until she had to go to hospice. We need suites that women can have a washroom in."

The project would provide suites with washrooms, which would enable the society to offer more long-term housing to women. The existing building would continue to offer shorter-term housing.

"We like the model we have," Bayes said of the housing that has staff onsite day and night in case they're needed. "You can always ask for help. There is support."

In addition to serving the needs of the community and shift workers at Royal Columbian Hospital, Bayes said the proposed daycare would also be used by the society's staff. The nighttime daycare/nursery hours would allow their parents to tuck their little ones into bed and go to work, knowing they were safe.

"We struggle with staff being able to work evenings because of their daycare," she said.

According to a staff report, the proposal will be undergoing a technical review by all city departments until February, and will need to be considered by the New Westminster design panel and the advisory planning commission. A report will likely go back to council in February or March, and council could consider rezoning of the site in June.

Bayes said the project is in the planning phase and the society welcomes community input.

"This is for us to hear feedback," she said about the meetings. "We like to tell people what we are doing."

In 2008, the Elizabeth Fry Society received council's approval to rezone 402 East Columbia St. to build a 12-bed shelter on the fourth floor of its existing building.

"When we rezoned for our shelter, the Sapperton residents were terrific," Bayes said. "We had some people express concerns. Really, there was a lot of support. We are a good neighbour. We have never had a problem in that building."

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