

Planning Commission forwards Envision center request to council

- [David McGee](#) October 20, 2020

BRISTOL, Va. — A request to allow the Bristol Redevelopment and Housing Authority to establish a community resource center sailed through the Planning Commission on Monday but not before commissioners voiced support for a homeless day center no longer included in those plans.

The commission voted 6-0 to recommend the City Council approve the authority's request for a special exception to allow the Envision center at 712 Oakview Ave. The center would be a federal Housing and Urban Development-designated facility offering educational classes, job search assistance and health care services.

An exception is needed since the property is zoned R-2 for single and two-family residential and doesn't currently allow a community resource center.

The authority's original request in August included space for a day center for the homeless, but that component was removed from the plans after some concerns arose.

“I was very pleased with the outcome, and I was also pleased with the comments about the day center that I heard today,” BRHA Executive Director Lisa Porter said. “We may revisit that at some point.”

Asked if another request to establish a homeless day center might come forward, she said, “We’ll have to see, but the most important thing today is the Envision center got the approval.”

The authority owns the 3,000-square-foot building located adjacent to Johnson Court and the former Douglass school. It formerly served as a child care center and later a community center.

Even though the homeless component wasn’t included, commissioners spent several minutes expressing support for the concept.

“Everybody says, ‘Not in my backyard.’ Unfortunately, in a city this small, every place is somebody’s backyard,” Chairman Michael Pollard said during the discussion. “I can understand both sides of it. ... I’m still very much in support of a day center in whatever format it may be able to be handled. ... I very much hope a day center can happen and happen quickly.”

If the housing authority ever wanted to establish a homeless day center, that would have to undergo a separate review, public hearing and approval before opening, City Planner Sally Morgan said after the meeting.

The council is expected to consider the request at its Oct. 27 meeting.

The City Council and Planning Commission held a joint public hearing on the Envision center last week and received only supportive feedback.

Planned services for the Envision center include educational classes, such as GED, financial literacy and parenting; job search assistance; health services through Crossroads Medical and substance abuse counseling. Services would be available to residents of both sides of town, not just those living in BRHA housing.

The Envision center could help “hundreds,” Porter said.

“We get calls every day now, and we’re already doing the work, but this will give us a location where we can have these programs in one spot, so it will be much improved,” Porter said.

Lynn Pannell, the authority’s family self-sufficiency coordinator, agreed.

“[With] the volume of calls the United Way has had just since the pandemic started, we would be able to alleviate their burden of having to field all of those, so that’s a win-win for everybody,” Pannell said.

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