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# Homeless shelter clears roadblock

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An effort to build a new and badly needed homeless shelter in Annapolis has cleared another hurdle after a city board rejected an attempt by a neighbor to block construction.

The five-member city Board of Appeals earlier this week denied an appeal by local attorney Michael Roblyer who challenged the city planning and zoning director's ruling that allows the planned shelter to be built on Hudson Street near the Annapolis National Guard Armory.

Annapolis Area Ministries officials are hoping to move the Light House shelter operations from its current cramped facility on West Street to a new center that would be built on 1.4 acres in the commercially zoned area packed with an assortment of businesses.

Plans for the building call for a first-floor office and administrative space and a second and third floor for residential use. The new center will allow the Light House to expand its staff and serve an estimated 1,500 people per year, according to its Web site.

Jon Arason, city planning and zoning director, ruled in January that the City Code allows for the facility to include residential uses on upper floors since the ground floor is designated for nonprofit office use.

Roblyer, whose offices are across Willow Avenue from the proposed homeless shelter, challenged Arason's interpretation of the residential use described in the building's plan.

"It's a basically a dormitory and not a 'dwelling unit' as (laid out in the city zoning code)," Roblyer said.

Both Arason and the shelter's attorney, Alan Hyatt, said the code allows for a broad determination for the residential usage in the business and commercial enterprise zone.

The Board of Appeals disagreed with Roblyer and upheld Arason's zoning determination during a standing-room only public hearing Tuesday night at City Hall.

Other neighboring business and property owners were restricted to testimony specifically addressing the zoning determination. Potential neighbors still aren't happy.

"We're not against homeless shelters, we're really not," said Tim Mealey, owner of Mealey's Signs on Willow Street next to the planned shelter. "But it, unfortunately, has a negative impact (on surrounding properties)."

Mealey said he's been trying to lease space for the past six months, but interested businesses have voiced concern about the homeless shelter being built next door.

"Like they said at the (Tuesday Board of Appeals) meeting, 'There's nothing wrong with a homeless shelter as long as it's not in my backyard,' you know," Mealey said.

This is not the first time the new Light House facility has faced a challenge. Last month, the City Council threatened to pull the plug on more than \$210,000 in financial breaks to build the new center.

Aldermen eventually agreed to waive \$123,550 in construction and permit fees. Shelter officials said the project would have potentially been derailed if the city voted against waiving those fees.

Baltimore-based architects Cho Benn Holback and Associates have agreed to design the new shelter for free. David Avedesian and John Bruno of Annapolis Developers, the owner representatives managing the design and construction of the new center, also are donating their services to the project, according to the shelter's Web site.

Shelter officials also will receive a \$400,000 capital grant from the city to build the new facility.

The new building will include a day center for the chronically homeless, emergency residential shelter for individuals and families, and a resource center for education and employments training and health and social services.

Officials also said they are planning to provide more programs for homeless people, including financial literacy workshops, job training, legal counseling and employment referrals.

Elizabeth Kinney, who is helping lead the fundraising effort for the new shelter, said nearly \$1.7 million already has been donated for the new building.

The fundraising campaign's goal is \$8.5 million, officials said. Shelter officials said they hope to start construction this summer and open the new Light House next year.

Barring an appeal of the board's decision to county Circuit Court, construction of the shelter will move forward.