

Letter To The Editor: Balancing Compassion and Prudence: An Alderman's Perspective on the Proposed Salvation Army Shelter

by Ray Strebel
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Dear Editor,

This is concerning the announcement that the “Salvation Army Proposes Updated Housing Facility, with New Amenities,” dated April 12, 2024. As an Alderman, it is my job to vet such proposals for the city and ask tough questions. I have had questions about this project throughout its various iterations, and I have raised my concerns in our Council meetings. However, many don't get a chance to attend our meetings. So I'm taking this opportunity to provide additional insights into the complexities surrounding

the proposed New Hope House and outline some of the discussions we have been having at the Alton City Council.

We all wish to protect those in need from suffering. But public policy must be a project of the head and the heart. We must analyze the consequences (intended or unintended) of well-meaning proposals. And even for good proposals, we must ask tough questions and demand clear answers before spending tax dollars on any project. This is true for all projects, but especially for one of such magnitude, both financial and social, like considering whether we should build the County's largest homeless shelter somewhere in our community.

My first concern is the potential strain on Alton's resources this project poses. I raised these in our meeting last week. What impact will this have on City resources? Do we know? Have we analyzed other similar shelters and their impacts on the municipalities that host them? And if this is a County project, will the County provide support for additional law enforcement calls when issues arise?

Further, how does this project fit into our region and Madison County as a whole? The Salvation Army is a cornerstone of support for our community, but it does not simply serve Alton. It serves the entire county, and has locations in both Granite City and Alton. Why has Alton been the only location considered for Salvation Army's new regional housing facility? Alton is in the far northwest corner of our county. Many residents in the southeast must travel over 40 miles to access services, a significant barrier to those in need. Is a more centrally located facility being considered? Such a location would greatly improve accessibility and service delivery across the county. Finally, does Alton have assurances from Madison County that they will help provide assistance to this new shelter over the years, since this is a resource serving the entire county?

These are just a few of my questions. But I have heard no satisfactory answer yet.

As Alton's Alderman, I am deeply aware of our city's resource limitations, compounded by a declining population. Introducing a homeless shelter in an area facing such challenges necessitates a well-supported and financially viable plan to ensure long-term success and benefit to our community.

I commend the Salvation Army's desire to serve our homeless neighbors, but without clear answers to these and similar questions, such a complex plan with such broad implications on our community is not a "no-brainer." It requires a collective commitment to develop a well-planned, sustainable location that serves the region as a whole, has the necessary regional financial backing, and does not create more problems for Alton than it solves.

Therefore, I call on the Salvation Army to not just propose one new location (I understand they are looking at a new site in Alton) but to also propose a more centralized location for this possible facility, one roughly equidistant from all parts of the County that it is meant to serve. From reading news reports on County discussions, it appears one major proponent of this project on the County Board was Alison Lamothe, representing District 18, which encompasses part of Edwardsville. Has a site in her area been considered? Has she been contacted to assist in finding a suitable location?

Finally, before any location is proposed, we need to know the opinions of all neighbors and businesses nearby. We cannot impose this change on any neighborhood, no matter how rich or poor, without everyone being heard and respected.

All of this is necessary to know before Alton takes the next step. Making sure we vet projects well is also a matter of charity and concern for all Altonians (homeless or not) and a moral imperative for the well-being of our society and good government.

Sincerely,

Raymond Clark Strebel

Alderman City of Alton

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