

Salvation Army Answers Questions, Concerns About New Hope House at Alton's 4th Ward Monthly Meeting

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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ALTON - Emotions were high at the 4th Ward Monthly Meeting as representatives from The Salvation Army spoke about plans for the New Hope House in Alton.

On Thursday, April 18, 2024, 4th Ward Alderwoman Rosie Brown hosted her regular 4th Ward Monthly Meeting at the Salvation Army. Community members were present to speak for and against plans to build a 48-bed homeless shelter in the Alton area.

What is the plan?

Representatives from The Salvation Army (TSA) began by speaking about [their plan for the New Hope House](#). The proposed shelter will have 48 beds and allow participants to stay for up to 90 days. Participants must be seeking employment and cannot use alcohol or substances while staying at the New Hope House.

“The Salvation Army has been here for 136 years,” Captain Cassy Grey said. “And for 40-plus of those years, we have been working with those who are unhoused and who are struggling, and we’ve had the opportunity, just right next door, to wrap around them, to choose to see them, to give them an opportunity to grow, to give them opportunity to learn, to give them the tools they need in order to succeed and get along to a pathway of hope, and we are excited to continue to do that.”

Grey, who captains the Alton TSA with her husband, spoke on behalf of the TSA alongside Travis Widman, a Salvation Army advisory council member, and Major Adam Moore.

Janell Smart, shelter program director for the Alton TSA, was also present to share statistics about homelessness in Madison County. Smart said clients come through the Madison County Homeless Referral Line (618-296-5300) and receive case management services, 30-day reviews, counseling, classes and other services that aim to help them obtain permanent housing. According to her, most of the clients she sees are from Madison County and 40–50% are Alton residents.

The project is budgeted at \$7.1 million. TSA has applied for \$2.5 million in Home-ARP funding through Madison County and will fund the remainder of the project with grants and TSA funding.

Previously, there were plans to build the New Hope House at the previous site of the Booth House in the 1st Ward. TSA addressed [concerns at a 1st Ward meeting last month](#). The project was put “indefinitely” on hold, according to [a press release by Madison County Board member Valerie Doucleff](#), but Widman then clarified at an [April 2 Grants Committee meeting](#) that they were “weeks, not months” away from presenting an alternative location.

“When people come to the doors of The Salvation Army, they never made the choices consciously to be requiring our services,” Moore added. “The men and women that we’re talking about tonight for providing shelter, they are your neighbors...They’re not dangerous, deranged people that we need to fear. They’re folks that we as a community need to reach out to and partner with them to create lasting change in their lives.”

Concerns and opposition

While the TSA representatives declined to share the specific locations they are currently looking at during the 4th Ward meeting, many people expressed concerns that it will be built in the 4th Ward.

“Since you’ve started this, you’ve been evasive with it,” said Jackie Monroe, who identified herself as Alton’s first female alderman. “You know in your heart that this is going to attract non-Altonians into Alton. I’m a fifth-generation Altonian. At the expense of the established older generations and the older established families, you are willing to bring into our community the kind of people that will tear our community apart.”

Moore said there are “a few properties” in Alton “that have been made available as options,” and two of them are in the 4th Ward. He said they have been committed to this project for four years, and that TSA has shared information “with great transparency and as immediately as we can.”

When asked if people would be drug-tested before being admitted to the program, Smart said a drug test would not be required, but TSA could administer random drug tests if they suspect a participant is using substances.

Other people noted that they have experienced break-ins and robberies, and they asked how TSA will guarantee this won’t happen if the New Hope House is built in the 4th Ward. Moore said he can’t promise this won’t happen, but their goal is to help the participants in the New Hope House “be good neighbors.”

“The Salvation Army isn’t bringing homeless people to Alton and to Madison County. I present to you that they are already here,” he added. “We’re helping people reach a place where they’re not desperate and doing things that normal people just wouldn’t do under normal circumstances.”

Brant Walker, a previous mayor of the City of Alton, was a vocal opponent of the project during the 4th Ward meeting. He spoke about the economic development of the city and how a shelter might impact home equity. At one point, when Brown attempted to regain control of the room, he snapped his fingers at her and said he wasn’t finished speaking.

“Substance abuse and/or mental illness, you’re not going to cure that in 30–90 days,” Walker said. “Alton — eight years of experience as mayor — is financially strapped. We’re not a wealthy community. Any additional calls for service in any way impacts other things we can do for our community...Why doesn’t some other community step

up and help us with the fragile people in our community, including Madison County? Why does it always have to be Alton that takes the brunt of it?...There's only so much burden one community can take."

Support for the project

"I'm a product of The Salvation Army," said Kennedy Smith, who oversees the nonprofit Unity in the Community. "The Salvation Army saved my life 15 years ago...Regardless of where we put this at, it needs to be. We sit there, we build a new hotel, we build a Starbucks, but we forget about our own people."

The room was divided between supporters and critics of the project. Supporters like Smith spoke about personal experiences with TSA or people they knew who have received services.

"I have had friends that have been homeless, not by drugs, not by something that happened overnight...I thank God for The Salvation Army and what they're doing," Matt Contarino said. "Most of the people treated like a dog. In fact, dogs got more respect than she did because they were taken to a shelter, and she was still sitting there."

At the end of the meeting, Annette Campbell shared her personal story with homelessness and encouraged people to think about their neighbors. Mayor David Goins led the room in prayer.

"I look at it from two perspectives as mayor of the city and as a born-again believer. And I truly believe what Jesus says, to do unto the least of these my brethren what you have done unto me," Goins said. "We're always going to have those who are less fortunate around us, and the best thing that we can do is put a hand down so we can give somebody a hand up."

If you or someone you know is experiencing homelessness in Madison County, opportunities for rent assistance, energy bill assistance, and more are available through The Madison County Referral Line at (618) 296-5300.