

Treatment center OK'd to reopen

County will operate mental health, addiction clinic

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FORT WAYNE – Allen County Community Corrections will be able to reopen Washington House as a treatment center for offenders suffering from both mental illness and drug abuse.

The Fort Wayne Board of Zoning Appeals on Thursday night approved the county's plans to take over the two-story residential clinic at 2720 Culbertson St., west of downtown. A lack of revenue forced Washington House's non-profit operator to close its doors three years ago. Washington House used to be an addiction treatment center.

But the plan would displace a church that neighbors say is already benefiting the area. The Community House, which the Washington House board let use the vacant facility for free, feeds the poor and offers counseling services, Bishop George McCowan said.

The church needs the property's kitchen and the gardens that community members planted on the property to continue serving about 10,000 meals each week, he said.

"We believe we're doing work that's causing a resurgence, not a decline," he said. Several neighbors said they wanted the church to stay.

Although the church is performing important community service, board members could not factor the building's current use into the decision, zoning board member Mike Bynum said. The property's owner – the Washington House board – can choose how to use that building, and the board has pledged to donate it to the county.

County Commissioner Nelson Peters said he would be willing to work with McCowan to find other potential homes for the church.

Community Corrections wants to turn Washington House into an inpatient and outpatient treatment center for ex-offenders dealing with mental illness and substance abuse. About 20 percent of community corrections' offenders have this dual diagnosis, director Sheila Hudson has said.

Washington House will be staffed around the clock and will be equipped with cameras and other security features, Hudson said. It would have 48 inpatient beds and treat about 50 outpatients. No sex offenders will be housed there, she said.

Several neighbors said they were concerned that the minimum-security facility would be a safety risk in the neighborhood. But the Wildwood Park Community Association, west of the site, viewed the project as an asset. Crime has increased since the Washington House shut its doors, association president Grant Shipley said.

"Crime has gone up in that area without an anchor," he said.

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