

July 5, 2008

## **EDC backing plan to fight homelessness City Council to get a unanimous recommendation**

By Lee Hammel TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

lhammel@telegram.com

**WORCESTER**— The City Council on Tuesday will receive the unanimous recommendation of its Economic Development Committee to approve a plan to battle homelessness in the city.

A previous plan to end homelessness in the city went down in flames amid disagreements in 2004 among members of the City Manager's Commission on Homelessness.

But earlier this week, there was a near love-in at the Economic Development Committee over the plan developed in November by a new City Manager's Task Force on Homelessness. It calls for ending homelessness in the city within three years, and City Manager Michael V. O'Brien said his goal is to bring down the census of the People in Peril homeless shelter at 701 Main St. by June 30 next year, to allow it to be closed permanently.

The love-in did not quite extend to the social services agencies, particularly Community Healthlink, which was the target of numerous barbs by city councilors, who noted the unhappiness of neighbors of Spencer House, a Housing First program the agency plans to open this month at 62 Elm St. But they seemed happy with Mr. O'Brien's explanation of how the city can exercise leverage over social service agencies that have used state and federal laws protecting the homeless to locate their programs, regardless of neighborhood or city input. Mr. O'Brien said funding for such housing programs should, in the future, be funneled through a "leadership council" within the Worcester County Continuum of Care.

The law will continue to prevent the city from telling nonprofit agencies where they can locate their programs, Mr. O'Brien said, "but there is no bigger hammer than telling an agency that their funding is in jeopardy" if they do not meet the goals of the city's homelessness plan. He said he anticipates that the city, as the hub of the region with its hospitals and social services and transportation, will be heavily represented on the leadership council.

Mr. O'Brien said regionalizing programs for the homeless and having services available for those in the homes are important for the success of the plan to end homelessness. It outlines a timeline over three years for providing 600 more units of housing and taking other steps that will have an annual operating cost of \$4.4 million and one-time expenditures of \$4.5 million in public funds.

Former Mayor Jordan Levy, co-chairman of the task force, warned the social service providers, "You've got to be a part of the community. While we understand that you have a pocketful of laws on your side, you have obligations and responsibility not only to those people who you represent, but to this community as a whole."

He added, "If everyone has good will, this city can be a national leader in ending homelessness." The task force report calls for shifting the fight against homelessness from emergency shelters such as the PIP to providing permanent housing through the Housing First concept. That concept has been pushed by social service agencies and finally accepted even by neighborhood voices such as District 4 Councilor Barbara Haller. It calls for providing housing without requiring treatment or sobriety for

**More...**

people, although it also requires that services be available to them, in the hope they will accept the services in order to meet behavior requirements and be able to stay.

The compromises that led diverse factions on the task force to make its report unanimous got skeptical city councilors, as well as Janice B. Yost, head of the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, the funder of Spencer House, to enthusiastically embrace the plan on Tuesday. David E. McCloskey, PIP director, said the homelessness plan gives him optimism. He reported that the average daily census at the shelter, operated by the South Middlesex Opportunity Council, was 80 for the month of June. That was the first time in many years that its monthly average was within its legal limit of 88 overnight guests.

Mr. McCloskey said he welcomes the city's leadership on the plan to convert the shelter to a triage service that would evaluate people for a short time before finding them permanent housing. He said he expects that a "responsible and respectful" strategy led by the city will enable the eventual closure of the 701 Main St. shelter.

District 3 Councilor Paul P. Clancy Jr. was enthusiastic about Mr. O'Brien's plan. "I've seen people fight for money (for housing) and then fight how the money will be used. Once the money is in private hands, in some cases there's total disregard for the taxpayers and government agencies that have supported them."