

Acorn House draws area's 'Friendly fire'

By Donna Gavin
Emerald Reporter

Control and civility prevailed in the Jefferson Middle School cafeteria last week when Fillmore Street residents accepted an invitation to meet their new neighbors.

Yet the Sept. 28 meeting was not a house warming. It was an opportunity to address neighborhood concerns about Acorn House, a new adult foster care home for AIDS patients. Under a lease with an option to buy, the home will operate in the Friendly neighborhood in southwest Eugene.

Members of the board of directors of Lane County AIDS Hospice Services, the agency that runs Acorn House, had been "surprised" during a meeting at the home when angry neighbors arrived to voice their objections to the move.

As a result, board members got together a second time to respond to neighbors' concerns.

Board members favored the Acorn House idea because they wanted to offer a home-like setting for AIDS patients who would probably be in different stages of the disease. The board anticipated an intensive search for a home that could fill a long list of criteria.

Sonduck said the board searched for a house that was accessible for people with disabilities, had a private yard, a

large family room and suitable bath and kitchen facilities. In addition, the owner would have to be willing to work with the agency's financial and legal constraints.

Daily operations would include a full-time manager, 24-hour nursing care and volunteers to maintain the property and help patients take walks and run errands.

Residents said it is precisely these activities that will generate unwelcome traffic.

Tucked between busy Chambers Street and 28th Avenue, Fillmore Street is normally traveled only by residents.

One woman, reading from a prepared statement with an emotion-filled voice, said the necessary activities of Acorn House would destroy the quiet and seclusion that residents had worked hard to attain.

Board member Tom Redfield acknowledged that Acorn House was a new venture for the board and no guarantees could be made. However, the impact would be less than a family with teen-agers and several cars.

"It will be a quiet operation," Redfield said.

Most patients would not have family to visit them and would rarely require emergency ambulance care, he said.

Redfield said through precise

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lost their homes."

Phelps said Acorn House should be able to provide treatment for less than \$300 a day. One day in the hospital can cost an AIDS patient more than \$1,000, which is usually paid for by taxpayers in the form of Medicaid.

"Gary," an AIDS patient who wished to remain anonymous, said adult foster care homes provide a level of care that cannot be matched at other facilities.

Many AIDS patients are forced to choose between running up an expensive hospital bill or seeking foster home care, which has been lacking in Lane County for several years. The absence of foster care homes creates unique problems.

"Sometimes they end up back with their families," Phelps said, "and there may be family issues concerning the disease that haven't been ironed out."

Gary said one of his friends who recently died had to go through "all kinds of hell," because foster care was not available in Lane County.

"He was in and out of the hospital so much," Gary said. "A lot of time you end up in the hospital because there's no place else to go."

Gary said he also knew of AIDS patients who had been put in nursing homes for lack of anywhere else to go.

"Those people aren't really set up to deal with (AIDS patients)," Gary said.

Phelps said people with AIDS who are put in nursing homes also have difficulty with the age gap.

Phelps said once through the licensing process, the Acorn House should be equipped to care for AIDS patients of all ages and in all stages of the disease. Many patients will stay at the facility for short periods of time — one or two months — as they have their first bout with AIDS-related diseases.

Acorn House will also provide hospice for people in the final, terminal stages of AIDS, where the goal is simply to make the patient comfortable.

"If you are entered into hospice," Phelps said, "you are no longer seeking treatment. The goal is not curing. The goal is comfort."

Concerns about the impact of Acorn House on the surrounding community has sparked a wave of opposition to the facility. Those worries were voiced Sept. 28 during a meeting between Acorn House representatives and neighbors.

Among the issues discussed at the meeting were concerns about possible parking problems, traffic and an influx of homosexuals to the area. Phelps said once the facility is operating, most concerns will be alleviated.

"We plan to be a good neighbor," Phelps said, "and after we're in here for a while they'll realize that. Like other adult foster care homes, we won't have that big of an impact in here."

Phelps said Acorn House will have a minimal impact on traffic in the neighborhood.

"I don't think we'll be any different than a family of five," he said. "If we were two parents with three kids, we'd probably cause more traffic."

Phelps agreed that the facility will probably attract homosexual patients and visitors.

"Yes, that population has been hit hard by AIDS, but we won't be asking people about their sexual orientation as they're coming through the door. That's not one of our concerns," he said.

Phelps said Acorn House has gone through all the proper legal channels before operating. The facility is considered a residence, which means it does not require special permits.

But one opposition group said it may resort to legal means to stop the Acorn House from operating in the neighborhood.

"There are some people who clearly won't be happy until we move away," Phelps said. "I don't know how to respond to that."

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