

Old Y building 'a money pit' - Facilities manager says city can't fix it; residents housed in motels

Ann Arbor News (MI) - Friday, November 11, 2005

Readability: 11-12 grade level (Lexile: 1210L)

Author: TOM GANTERT

News Staff Reporter

One official says the old **YMCA building** in downtown Ann Arbor has become a "money pit" as the city weighs what to do with the low-income residents who normally live there.

The City Council on Thursday discussed finding alternative housing for about 90 residents, a move that one council member estimated could cost the city about \$1.6 million over the next two years. The council approved spending nearly \$160,000 to keep the residents in two local motels through the end of the year.

The residents have been living in the motels since Oct. 20, when the old Y **building** was thought to be just temporarily closed after pipes broke and flooded a floor and knocked out the heat for the **building**. Officials had hoped the **building** could be fixed and the residents could be moved back in quickly into their single-room-occupancy efficiency units.

But the council was told at Thursday's meeting the city "can't win this battle."

"There is no hope for this place," Facilities Manager Bob Lewis told the council. "I'm flat out telling you, it's a money pit." Lewis said it would cost \$175,000 to have the **building** repaired just through the winter, but "guaranteed" that other pipes would burst. He said the **building** would

be condemned by city inspectors.

The Y residents have been the focus of a council desire to keep the city's most vulnerable residents in the core downtown. The residents earn on average about \$11,000 a year and pay \$380 a month in rent. Many of the residents are mentally and/or physically disabled or were homeless.

In 2003, the council trumped an Ann Arbor Transportation Authority \$3.5 million bid to buy the **building** on Fourth Avenue and William Street. They feared the AATA wouldn't keep the 100 single-occupancy, low-income units in the downtown when the Y moved to its new facilities on the west side of downtown earlier this year.

City officials say they knew the **building** was dilapidated and have approved a bid to redevelop the property by 2007. Earlier this month, a developer pitched a 12-story and a 14-story **building** on the site that would include the low-income units.

"Owning the **building** is not the problem," said City Council Member Mike Reid, R-2nd Ward. "It's operating the single-room occupancy units. ... The open-ended question is, 'How much of a commitment can the city continue to have?'"

Reid said his "back-of-the-envelope" estimate was that the net cost would be around \$1.6 million if the city had to put up the 90 residents until 2007.

Council Member Leigh Greden, D-3rd, said the costs should go down once the city had time to come up with a long-term solution. "When you have 90 people thrown out of a **building** because a pipe burst, you can't snap your fingers and have it fixed instantly," Greden said. "We are

exploring a variety of alternatives. We are committed to housing this population."

City officials were reluctant to provide estimates of how much it would cost to house 90 residents for two years before the new complex is built.

The council approved Thursday paying \$43,549 for 50 rooms for 23 nights at the Motel 6 at 3764 South State Street and another \$13,049 for eight rooms for 30 nights at Studio Plus at 3265 Boardwalk. That covered the residents' rooms from Oct. 20 through today.

The council approved another contract for \$101,040 for 60 rooms for another 42 nights.

Jayne Miller, the city's Community Services Area Administrator, said that will keep the 90 residents housed until the end of the year.

Miller said because of the two upcoming University of Michigan football home games, the 90 residents are being moved today to hotels in Canton. The rooms the residents were in had been previously booked in advance by football fans.

Daniel Seller, a **YMCA** resident, said Thursday many of the residents weren't happy about moving to Canton because it kept them far away from friends, family and vital medical services located in downtown Ann Arbor.

Miller said the residents would be moved back to the Motel 6 in Ann Arbor on Nov. 20, where they would stay until the end of December.

"We have bought some time until the end of December," Miller said.

Miller said the city is unsure what will happen after that.

Council Member Jean Carlberg, D-3rd Ward, said it's not ideal for residents to stay in the hotels because there is more than one to a room. She said the city is reaching out to its human services agencies for solutions.

"We have a ... crisis that we have to solve as a community," Carlberg said after the meeting. "We are calling on all of them (human services agencies) to help."

Carlberg said she had no regrets about buying the Y **building** . The council voted 11-0 to buy the **building** .

"Let's look at the alternatives," Carlberg said. "It would have been on someone else's shoulders. They would have closed the Y and said, 'We are not responsible for that population.' Then it would fall on the human services agencies."

In June, Y residents complained that the seven-story hotel was in poor condition and accused the city of being "slumlords."

Seller and other residents complained to The News of unsanitary conditions in restrooms, constant maintenance problems with community phones, drinking fountains and toilets that don't work and a broken elevator. Residents said some had to walk as many as seven flights of stairs during 90 degree temperatures during the summer.

Although the city owns the **building** , the **YMCA** continued to monitor the residential units. City inspectors came in to verify the Y had fixed the problems by mid-July. Mark Lloyd, the city's planning and development director, has said the old Y **building** is considered to be a private hotel. He said inspections have to be complaint driven.

Miller said at the time that the city inspectors only investigate the specific complaints.