

\$15 MILLION HOMELESS SERVICES CENTER IN THE WORKS

Mike Murphy

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The vacant plot on Business Loop 70 east of the city's power plant that would be the location of a planned new homeless services center.

A Columbia non-profit organization hopes to break ground this spring on construction of a “comprehensive homeless services center” off Business Loop 70 on a vacant plot just east of the city-owned power plant that includes a 25,000 square-foot facility with up to 100 beds, a kitchen, laundry facilities, showers, secure storage, kennel, computer lab, drop-in center, medical and dental clinics and a price tag that could reach \$15 million.

The Voluntary Action Center (VAC) would operate the facility with other non-profit partners and provide a 24/7 emergency shelter 365 days per year to serve individuals experiencing “chronic and unsheltered homelessness in Boone County,” according to documents obtained from city hall through a Sunshine law open records request.

The request was directed at City Manager De'Carlton Seewood's proposed 2023 city budget released in late July that includes a \$400,000 appropriation of a federal grant to VAC. The request for supporting documents unearthed a detailed grant application and discovery of VAC Executive Director Ed Stansberry's transcribed testimony in June before the city's Housing and Community Development Commission.

Stansberry had not responded to earlier requests from CoMoBUZ beginning in late May to discuss the planned facility, which will be called the Opportunity Campus. On Monday, he defended the lack of information disseminated to the public.



Ed Stansberry

"It has always been our philosophy to deal in actuals vs. what-ifs," Stansberry said. "And at this point there are a lot of what-ifs, and not a whole lot of actuals. We make it a practice to make the announcements and share information that is actual instead of theoretical."

According to documents, VAC has hired Little Dixie Construction as its general contractor and PWArchitects for architectural services. Mark Palmer, a former CEO of Woodhaven, has been hired as the project coordinator. A contract is in place to purchase the 5.65-acre site on Business Loop 70 for \$602,000. The parcel is owned by Bowling Street LLC of Columbia, according to city records. Bowling Street LLC is owned by Ward 6 Councilperson Betsy Peters according to secretary of state records. Peters acknowledged the deal on Sunday.

"I bought the property last year when it went up for sale," Peters said. "It looked like a good property for an opportunity center. After looking at other sites, VAC decided to make an offer to buy the property and I'm willing to sell it for the same price I bought it for last year. However, before completing the sale, they need to make sure it meets their needs. So they are doing their due diligence. If it doesn't meet their needs, then the sale will be off."

Peters is a retired pediatrician who invests in real estate and has several rental properties throughout the city, primarily in the east campus area. She was elected to the city council in 2015.

The city awarded a Request for Proposal (RFP) to the Columbia Housing Authority for \$75,000 earlier this year to develop a plan for comprehensive homeless services in the city that would include VAC's Opportunity Campus as well as broader plans for transitional and permanent supportive housing. Housing Authority CEO Randy Cole is scheduled to deliver a preliminary report to the city council during its regular meeting on Monday. The housing authority will then work with city staff on refining the plan for a final version due back to the city council by Sept. 30. Part of this work is determining an annual operating budget for VAC's Opportunity Campus.

"I plan to provide a summary of the input we received from the public, local unsheltered populations, and service providers, as well as an overview of the plan with the understanding that the plan still needs staff review and comment prior to final submission," Cole said. "We've been working on this collaboratively and I have been assisting VAC refine estimated operational costs for their piece of the project."

Stansberry said no funding has yet been secured for construction of the Opportunity Campus, but progress could happen fast about the time Cole's final report is delivered. Gov. Mike Parson signed legislation in June that includes \$6 million for Columbia's homeless shelter. It has been assigned for administration to the state's Department of Social Services.

"We don't have the details yet on how that would be applied for or what criterion would have to be met," Stansberry said. "That's the first big domino that has to fall, and hopefully that coincides with when the city's planning RFP is due. It's likely matching funds will be required and at that point we can further the conversation with the city. We have plans to approach the county as well. And there will also be a private capital campaign conducted."

Stansberry told the Housing and Community Development Commission that total project cost for the property, emergency shelter and resource center is estimated to be “somewhere between \$12-and-\$15 million, total.” He said the funding will come from state, local and county governments, private foundations, faith-based organizations, individuals and business owners. He said VAC has \$1.7 million in cash on hand and pledges from individuals and foundations. He said if funding dominoes fall as anticipated, they could break ground in spring of 2023 and after 10-15 months of construction be ready to open doors in 2024.

Stansberry said annual operational costs will be sustained through rental income from VAC partners, public health funding, city and county funding, United Way, private fundraising and faith community support.

VAC’s partners in the Opportunity Campus include Turning Point, Loaves and Fishes, and Room at the Inn. Turning Point, which is currently located at Wilkes Boulevard Methodist Church, would relocate to the Opportunity Campus and operate the drop-in center. Loaves and Fishes would serve about 150 free, community meals each evening. A resource center would be separate and distinct from the emergency shelter and provide a variety of supportive services including behavioral health, mental health, substance abuse treatment and employment services from several community partners.

The grant application states the primary goal of the Opportunity Campus is to “end homelessness through care and support services provided by the emergency shelter with quick placement to permanent housing.” VAC estimates the emergency shelter would serve about 500 individuals annually, including 100 individuals daily with overnight shelter, 80 individuals daily with meals and 60 individuals daily with day center resources.

But Stansberry acknowledged many of the homeless issues downtown or at the encampments will likely remain unsolved.

“We will not be solving the homeless problem in Columbia,” Stansberry said. “We’re taking a significant step towards that. And this facility will be open to 100% of the homeless population from the day it opens its doors. But some will self-select out. Our barriers are very low. Mental health issues, substance abuse issues, these do not prevent you from entering this facility. If you are coming in we can deal with those things through our partnerships with Phoenix, Burrell, Compass, whoever. We can provide the resources to lift them up and out of homelessness. But it’s important to know, we’re not going to eliminate the homeless pro

He said the choice of the location on Business Loop 70 is near other related services and creates a proximity for accessing resources. The Salvation Army's Harbor House shelter is nearby and the housing authority's Welcome Home center for homeless vets is down the road.

"The current facility at Wilkes Boulevard Methodist Church has been a burden on that neighborhood and the desire was expressed early to move it out of that neighborhood," Stansberry said. "We looked for where the population we would serve exists and three or four blocks north or south of the I-70 corridor felt like we were in the right spot to access our resources. We're not just a facility to serve the chronically unsheltered. We're here to provide resources to lift them up and out of homelessness."

Stansberry said the location fits with the shelter's "housing first" operating model.

"That means you provide housing, because recovery and advancement is launched most effectively from a place you can call home," he said.

Stansberry said the Opportunity Campus will become a program of VAC, which would oversee a staff that manages the facility. VAC is a 501(c)3 non-profit social services agency located on Vandiver Drive in Columbia that serves Boone County. It receives funding from various partners, local faith congregations, veteran's groups, local businesses and individuals. Its mission is to assist Boone County residents who are experiencing hardships by providing resources for basic and emergency needs and aid to overcome hardships and maintain self-sufficiency.

Stansberry became executive director in December 2020 after the retirement of Nick Foster, who is now a city councilman from the fourth ward. It has a 16-member board of directors, led by new President Mark Thomas, who is a director of advancement at MU. In the five-year period from 2015-2019, its annual contribution revenues ranged from \$526,828 to \$769,753, according to the latest Form 990 available from the IRS.

MORE INFORMATION



QUESTIONS LOOM OVER HISTORIC PROPERTY FOR PROPOSED HOMELESS SHELTER

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