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HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

The Human Services Committee (formerly the Social Services Committee) of Community Board No. 2, Manhattan, held its regular monthly meeting by Zoom on May 25, 2021, at 6:30pm.

Committee Members Present: Susanna Aaron, Chair; William Benesh, Keen Berger, Wayne Kawadler, Adam Zeldin

Committee Members Tardy With Notice: John Paul Deverna

Other CB2 Members Present: Amy Brenna, Coral Dawson, Valerie De La Rosa, Mar Fitzgerald, Michael Levine, Matthew Metzger, Donna Raftery, Susan Wittenberg, Antony Wong, Eugene Yoo

CB2 Staff Present: Bob Gormley, District Manager; Josh Thompson

Public Members Absent With Notice: Jessica Aaron, Rachel Yarmolinsky

Representatives of Elected Officials Present: Kana Ervin and Anthony Drummond (Chin), Charlie Anderson (Glick)

Members of the Public Present: Over 200 people registered to attend the meeting, and 128 participants were noted on the Zoom call. Twenty-two people registered in advance to speak. Two registered speakers spoke in support of the shelter plan and twenty spoke in opposition. Technical difficulties with the recording of the meeting prevent an exact record of additional community participation, but the committee heard questions and comments from at least ten additional community members.

The meeting adjourned around 9:30pm. There was no business session.

Agenda: Second presentation by NYC Department of Social Services and the not-for-profit organization WestHab regarding plans to build an adult men's shelter at 10 Wooster Street/349 Canal Street.

Panelists:

- Molly Parker, First Deputy Commissioner, NYC Department of Homeless Services (DHS).
- Leilani Irvin, Director of External Affairs, NYC Department of Social Services (DSS).
- James Coughlin, COO, WestHab
- Valerie C. Smith, Assistant VP, WestHab
- Daniel Liles, Directory of Security, WestHab

The NYC Department of Social Services (DSS), which includes the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), has entered into contract with WestHab, a not-for-profit social service provider

based in Westchester, to construct and operate a shelter for 200 homeless male adults at 349 Canal Street, a building also known as 10 Wooster Street.

REPORT

NOTE: A fuller report on this topic was written after the committee’s first meeting with WestHab, on March 25, 2021. As of this writing, that report and additional information are available at <https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb2/committee-materials/human-services/>

As a result of input heard at the March 25, 2021, meeting with CB2’s Human Services Committee, WestHab has altered the design of the facility to place the entrance of this shelter at 349 Canal Street. 10 Wooster Street may still serve for fire egress or other use to be determined through the ongoing design process.

The opportunity for an on-site smoking facility has not been identified.

The city and homelessness

DSS-DHS is “committed to giving communities advance notice along with an opportunity to provide input.”¹ According to DSS’s 2017 plan “Turning the Tide on Homelessness,” “the City now consistently provides more than 30 days of notice to elected officials” when a shelter is planned. In this instance, NYC DSS-DHS has notified Community Board 2 at the beginning of the shelter’s design phase, about 18 months in advance of its opening. The shelter’s operation is expected to commence sometime in 2022-2023, pending construction and approval timelines. Construction is as-of-right and the site is not subject to ULURP (Uniform Land Use Review Process) but the project will undergo other approval processes before opening, such as a Fair Share evaluation and inspections by the Department of Buildings.

DSS shared with CB2 a map of homeless shelters by Community District. That map is available at <https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb2/committee-materials/human-services/>. The exact locations of shelters are withheld in the interest of clients’ privacy.

DSS also shared with CB2 the file of a power point presentation on the City’s homelessness policies, as well as answers to questions submitted to DSS by Community Board 2. Those documents are available at <https://cbmanhattan.cityofnewyork.us/cb2/committee-materials/human-services/>.

DHS Deputy Commissioner Molly Park described some of the city’s policies and operations. DHS currently provides shelter to about 48,000 people experiencing homelessness, including families with children and adults. Mayor DeBlasio’s “Turning the Tide on Homelessness” plan has committed to closing some of the 600 buildings across the city used to house the homeless, many of which are poorly-suited to people’s recovery. The department has reduced its footprint

¹ NYC Department of Social Services, “Turning the Tide on Homelessness.” Page 103.
<https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dhs/downloads/pdf/turning-the-tide-on-homelessness.pdf>

by more than 40%. It has closed buildings with extensive code violations as well as “cluster sites.”

At the same time, “Turning the Tide” calls for the development of 90 new shelters. 46 have opened to date. The maximum size for new shelters is 200 adults; only some older shelters house more. Sites are selected through an open-ended RFP – Request for Proposals – that seeks to expand the capacity of homeless shelters throughout the city. Not-for-profit service providers are invited to respond to an RFP and their proposal is reviewed by the agency. Criteria for selection include the cost of the project, the experience of the provider, and the location of the shelter. “Turning the Tide” advocates for equitable distribution of shelters throughout the city. Community District 2 currently has no “permanent” shelters. One commercial hotel is currently used for shelter, but the city’s administration is committed to ending the use of commercial hotels for shelter.

Some shelters in the city are not contracted by DHS. The Bowery Mission is an example of such private shelters.

During the DeBlasio administration, Molly Park says, DHS has moved 165,000 people out of shelter and into permanent subsidized housing. The return-to-shelter rate is about 6%.

New Yorkers’ right to shelter is guaranteed by law. Individuals and families seeking shelter may apply to DHS for shelter. They begin the process at an Intake Center. For adult men, the Intake Center is located at 400-430 East 30th St. While this is within the Bellevue complex, it is unrelated to Bellevue’s health services. The applicant then undergoes an assessment process that ranges from 10 days to three weeks to determine what particular supports, if any, the individual needs, after which he is assigned to a program shelter such as the one planned for 349 Canal Street. This shelter will be a general population shelter. The city prefers to place people in their local communities, but given the extraordinary need for shelter, is not always able to meet that interest. No sex offenders who have residency restrictions will be placed in this site.

Shelter design and operation is tightly regulated. A minimum of three feet between beds is required by law. Homeless shelters are inspected twice a year by the “shelter inspection squad,” an interagency effort that includes inspectors from DHS as well as the Department of Buildings and the Fire Department. DHS staff monitors shelters regularly from a programmatic perspective as well, talking to staff and clients. On top of this, there is regular use of administrative data such as completion rates of independent living plans, move-outs, etc. Shelters are also monitored by the NYS Office of Temporary Disability Assistance, and Coalition for the Homeless is the legal monitor to ensure DHS compliance with the legal mandate to provide shelter.

Every year, DHS sends a letter to Community Boards and Council Members soliciting proposals of sites that would be appropriate for a shelter, but it receives very few suggestions.

Housing and homelessness

Molly Park spoke of the relationship between the housing crisis and homelessness. 20% of households are categorized as extremely low income and are paying more than 50% of their income on rent. This is 600,000 *households* (not individuals). By the time individuals seek shelter through DHS they have fallen through many other systems. Providing a safety net is the

city's legal and moral responsibility. Helping people come off the street is good for people and good for communities.

WestHab, the not-for-profit service provider

The city has accepted WestHab's proposal for the shelter at 349 Canal Street and is currently in the process of developing a contract and determining a budget, progress which DHS says is "totally normal for something this far out" before opening. The contract must then be submitted to the law department and approved by the Comptroller. The term of city contracts is generally five years with a five-year renewal.

WestHab has provided homeless services in Westchester for over 40 years, and within NYC over the last six years. It currently operates ten programs in the city, including six shelters for single adults in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, and has been in the process of developing an additional shelter in Manhattan. At 349 Canal Street WestHab is in the process of negotiating its lease with the developer who has purchased the building and will renovate it. The developer, Liberty One, is handling the building process. The building will undergo all normal inspection and building processes, including any necessary environmental remediation. The development process is expected to take 18 months.

349 Canal Street

James Coughlin, COO, and Valerie Smith, Assistant VP, answered questions about the building and the program. In response to a question about program quality, Coughlin said that high quality starts with the building itself, ensuring that it is brightly lit, cheerful, clean, and has good air quality. It's important to have program space and recreational space. Recreational space at this shelter is likely to include a television viewing area, a cafeteria, and a resource room with computers. WestHab will offer case management, social work services, housing placement, job placement, training programs. It will place clients in internships, and will have a recreational specialist on its staff. It anticipates clients will reside anywhere from nine months to a year.

The staff will include a licensed social worker, and will also make referrals to other agencies that provide psychiatric services. If clients have severe mental health issues WestHab will work with DHS to arrange a transfer to a more appropriate facility.

WestHab says that it has experience operating shelters that, because of pre-existing conditions, house dorms of 40 to 50 people per room. Dorms at 349 Canal Street will house eight to twelve people. Dorms are periodically patrolled. WestHab expects that there will be issues between certain residents as a matter of course but anticipates that its staff will succeed in mediating these within the facility, or in transferring clients to a different dorm or a different facility as needed.

Clients are not required to leave the shelter during the day. This shelter will provide programming and recreational space for clients. The shelter has a 10pm curfew but also provides passes for those with late job hours. The opportunity for an on-site smoking area has not at this time been identified.

WestHab's Director of Security, Daniel Liles, says that WestHab is committed to collaborating with residents, business owners, and local law and fire enforcement on safety issues. WestHab has already reached out to the 1st precinct of the NY Police Department and they have agreed to

meet and work together as the project progresses. WestHab will have a foot patrol and possibly a roving vehicle but does not intend to police the entire community.

In response to comments about urination and defecation already being experienced on Canal Street, WestHab notes that existing issues on Canal Street are not the result of its shelter, which is not yet in operation. In response to a comparison between this facility and a shelter currently operating on West 26th St, DHS clarified that that shelter is a 200-bed facility that specializes in clients with mental health issues.

Questions and comments from the public:

- How will we know that tax dollars are being wisely spent? How is the shelter budgeted and how does that compare to other shelters?
- How can we be assured that this shelter is going to be a high-quality shelter?
- What is the cost of the lease in this high-value neighborhood? What percentage of the budget will go to the lease rather than to services?
- This neighborhood has a small amount of open space compared to, say, many neighborhoods in Queens or the Bronx. How will you provide physical recreation activities for your clients?
- Is there a chance that adding 200 adults to this area will have environmental impacts on the area's sewage capacity?
- Where will the men go when they are not in the shelter?
- Is the system of mental health services adequate? How do we know the men are getting what they need?
- Can we have more information about WestHab's other locations? It would be very helpful to have some familiarity with the operation of a shelter and the experience of living next to a homeless shelter.
- Will there be doors to the shelter on Wooster Street? What will these be used for?
- How can we hold WestHab accountable in the event of dangerous activity?

In opposition

- This proposal is human warehousing and degrading and unhealthy.
- Housing twelve men in one room is bad policy.
- 200 people is just too many.
- There are vulnerable seniors in this area who worry about safety.
- Families with children worry a lot about safety and won't want to allow their young teenagers to walk unaccompanied.
- The street is quiet at night with little open street-level activity. This contributes to fears of crime.
- This is a historic district and the picture you are painting is not pretty.
- This is an expensive neighborhood. It doesn't make sense to place this population in an area where there are so few services affordable to them.
- This is simply an opportunity for a property owner and developer to make a lot of money.
- There are hotels in Staten Island that make a lot more financial sense as shelters.
- We worry that our property values will plummet once the shelter is on-site.
- Having this shelter there is going to decrease the long-term supply of housing in New York.
- I'm not sure if our business can survive having a shelter two doors away.
- Some of us should pool our money and buy the location ourselves and turn it into something useful.
- Men will be loitering on the street, and crime and violence will increase.

- People are going to be urinating and defecating on the street and they will be mentally ill and screaming at me as I go to get my coffee.
- WestHab is lying.
- The city should not do business with Liberty One, which has been the target of complaints.

In support

- Affordable housing is a critical need, but in the meantime, shelters are necessary. Where else would people go? This community has always welcomed its arms to new people and this an opportunity to get to know the men who live in the shelters.
- Trinity Church Wall Street is committed to serving all neighbors, especially the most vulnerable. Trinity believes that shelters should be located equitably across the city and that all should share in addressing the homelessness crisis.

NEXT STEPS

WestHab and DSS have promised to return to CB2 to receive additional community input, answer further questions, and share updates about the ongoing design process. A date for our next meeting is under discussion but as of this writing has not been scheduled.

Concerned neighbors are invited to contact the office of City Council Member Margaret Chin.

DSS-DHS will form a Community Advisory Council once this facility is operational. It will seek names from the Community Board and the City Council Member's office for interested candidates.