

Palm Beach County plans on overhauling hotel to offer affordable housing

By Abigail Hasebroock South Florida Sun Sentinel

A hotel building will be transformed into a center offering affordable housing for seniors and veterans in the most recent effort by Palm Beach County officials to address the housing and homelessness crisis.

County Commissioners narrowly agreed Tuesday to purchase the La Quinta Inn at 5981 Okeechobee Blvd., in an unincorporated part of the county, just east of Florida's Turnpike and not far from West Palm Beach.

The 114-room inn would be turned into "permanent supportive housing," according to county documents.

James Green, the county's community services department director, clarified the difference between "supportive housing" and a homeless shelter during a public meeting Tuesday.

"A homeless shelter would be a facility where people who are currently unhoused on the street would be placed in a shelter for up to 90 days or so. This facility is not looking to place individuals from the street," he said. "We're looking to help individuals or seniors who are about to be evicted, or they're housed but they're at risk of becoming unhoused.

"We're looking to place them into the facility or if they're housed and it's just in a temporary setting, then they'll be placed in a more permanent setting."

The homes, which will be renovated, would be similar to efficiency units with a refrigerator and microwave. Support services — including on-site case management, employment support, mental health support, daily meals, laundry and housekeeping, and transportation — also could be included.

County officials also are suggesting social and recreation activities, such as a library, arts and crafts, fitness classes and entertainment events.

To keep in line with the project's intention as supportive housing over being a general shelter, the admission criteria for prospective residents includes:

Being at least 55 years old.

Being a county resident.

No violent felonies within the past five years.

Paying up to 30% of gross household income for rent to live in one of the hotel's converted units, and an extra 20% for support services.

"We're not looking to place individuals who are sex offenders or have committed violent crimes, illegal drugs. It's not something that we're looking to allow on the property, and the tenants must have the mental and physical capacity to manage their daily lives," Green said. "Any behavior that jeopardizes the safety of others certainly will not be tolerated."

If, for example, someone became unable to care for themselves, county officials would work with assisted living facilities to move them elsewhere.

County Administrator Verdenia Baker said during the meeting that the county wants "to stabilize our seniors."

"We want to get them in a situation that they can move, not necessarily stay here forever, but they will be able to move to another affordable unit and maybe a bigger complex that will free these units up to move others into," she said. "But right now we're looking at it being permanent until they're able to and want to move forward."

'The dumping grounds'

Directly north of the La Quinta Inn is Century Village, a 55-and-over community, and several of the residents spoke out at Tuesday's meeting in opposition to the hotel project.

The sentiment was the same: No one was against helping seniors and veterans, but they didn't feel the La Quinta Inn was a good choice for the project, namely because of its proximity to the Century Village residences.

"I'm not opposed to helping the homeless," Patricia Caputo, a Century Village resident, said to the commissioners. "Please shop around. There are other places that I think we should place the veterans because they've been overlooked for years. ... We at Century Village, we're not evil people, we're not against helping people. We just feel like we're the dumping grounds."

Alternatively, other people expressed avid support for the project and pleaded with the commissioners to go through with it.

"Your leadership in this initiative is a critical step toward addressing the housing crisis in our community," Jennifer Sellars, on behalf of the county's Homeless and Housing Alliance, said. "We must do everything in our power to protect our most vulnerable neighbors and ensure that

no senior or veteran is left without shelter. ... This is not just a policy decision. It is a moral imperative.”

Aiming to be a ‘good neighbor’

According to the county code, all acquisitions must be approved by a supermajority vote of at least five of the seven commissioners rather than the usual four. Five commissioners voted to approve the acquisition of the La Quinta Inn.

In addressing concerns from Century Village residents, Commissioner Joel Flores said the county will be “good neighbors” and will not only maintain the property but improve it.

“If you currently have an issue at La Quinta, we’re going to be solving that for you. I know that you might not be happy. But unfortunately La Quinta is where it is, and it’s a project that’s coming before us to make that decision,” he said. “I love when we all say, ‘I love the project. I want to help seniors. I want to help veterans as long as it’s not in my backyard,’ but at some point we have to look out after our seniors and after our veterans.”