

WHAT TO PUT IN THE OLD FIRE STATION?

Neighbors push against homeless services proposal, suggest art gallery, pop-up shops at open house

Virginia Barreda - Des Moines Register USA TODAY NETWORK



D
Des Moines residents gather for an open house on April 7 at the old Des Moines Fire Station 4, 917 University Ave., to share their ideas for what could be housed inside the space. VIRGINIA BARREDA/THE REGISTER

From a coffee house to a day care center, neighbors have dozens of ideas about what could go in the old fire station on Des Moines' near northside.

Des Moines Fire Station No. 4 moved to a new 21,000-square-foot building on Clark Street between Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway and 19th Street. The new location replaces station 4 — the city's second oldest fire station — at 917 University Ave.

Now the city must decide what to do with the now-vacant space.

Des Moines received a proposal earlier this year from Friends of the Catholic Worker to lease a portion of the 8,600-square-foot station as a resource center for people experiencing homelessness. But neighbors in the area pushed back.

In a letter expressing opposition to Friends of the Catholic Worker's proposal, Near Northside Neighbors — a coalition of neighborhood associations, neighbors and organizations on the north side — wrote that the area already hosts a disproportionate share of homeless and crisis services, pointing to organizations such as Bethel Mission, Urban Dreams and the Polk County sobering center.

Catholic Worker's proposed resource center, which would include an emer-

gency shelter, meals, showers, and temporary housing, "would deepen a concentration that is already grossly inequitable," the letter stated.

At an open house hosted by Des Moines' Office of Economic Development on Tuesday, April 7,

neighbors were given the chance to share their vision for the former fire station, wedged between the River Bend and King Irving neighborhoods. City staff offered tours, shared the building's history and asked neighbors to fill out surveys of what they wanted to see.

Longtime Cheatom Park resident Jamie Yovonie said she often sees homeless individuals while walking down the street. The neighborhood doesn't need additional social services, she said, adding that she already doesn't always feel safe.

Des Moines residents gather for an open house on April 7 at old Des Moines Fire Station 4, 917 University Ave., to share their ideas for what could be housed inside the space. VIRGINIA BARREDA/THE REGISTER

Yovonie said she would love to see a day care, an art gallery or a yoga studio at the former fire station.

Darlana McElroy-Renard, who serves on the board of the Mondamin Presidential Neighborhood Association, said she wants to see people experiencing homelessness and poverty get the services they need "but just not all funneled here in our neighborhood."

"I think they need to be spread (out)," she said.

McElroy-Renard said she'd like to see a place that draws community, whether it's a small business incubator that can accommodate pop-up businesses or a workspace.

No matter what goes in the space, McElroy-Renard said it's going to have a huge impact on the community.

"We're on the main corridor and that literally travels from one end of the city to the other," she said.

Breann Bye, Des Moines economic development project manager, said the building is an asset and staff want to take the time to garner ideas from the community for the station's future.

"I mean, just anything that will add value to the neighborhood versus taking it away," she said.

"I think that the residents of this area have a unique sort of passion. They pay attention to what's going on. They expect to be part of the process," she said.

Community input gathered will shape a future request for proposals for the space, which will be accepted through the end of the year.

The next open house at the fire station is from 10 a.m. to noon April 11.

Virginia Barreda is the Des Moines city government reporter for the Register. She can be reached at vbarreda@dmreg.com.