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Campus to assist homeless people

DEBRA SKODACK

Looking at plans for a multimillion-dollar downtown campus for the homeless, George Cherry liked what he saw:

Three two-story buildings just east of the downtown loop would have lockers and showers, breakfast and lunches on weekdays and mental health care. But most impressive to Cherry, job training for homeless people.

"They need someplace to go and develop skills and help themselves," said Cherry, who once was homeless once. He now works a lawn-care job and volunteers in the community kitchen at Grace and Holy Trinity Cathedral. "They are trapped in the system and they need to be taught."

Homeless and formerly homeless people attended focus groups last week to get a first look at plans for a one-stop service center, which would be built at Ninth and Harrison streets.

A task force - including social service providers, civic leaders, advocates for the homeless, officials from private foundations and city staffers - has spent 18 months developing the plans. The estimated cost of the project is \$16 million to \$17 million, and the task force hopes to tap private foundations and individuals, federal and state grants and perhaps a city bond issue, project coordinator Jan Kauk said. The goal is to present the plans to the Kansas City Council in early December.

City approval is required because the 77,596-square-foot center, to be called the Margaret Kemp Campus, would be built on the site of Margaret Kemp Park.

The center would not have beds for overnight stays, but it would be within blocks of two of

the area's largest homeless shelters.

"I think there is a lot of opportunity there because of the one location, and it brings homelessness to the forefront again," said **Cynthia Larcom**, director of the Homeless Services Coalition of Greater Kansas City.

A one-stop campus isn't a new concept, **Larcom** said.

"Something like that was talked about 15 to 20 years ago," she said. "They just couldn't get the funding."

What did open was a daytime services center that was first operated by Metropolitan Lutheran Ministry and now by reStart Inc. But that center, at 600 E. 11th St., would be demolished to make way for the proposed \$340 million East Village downtown renewal project.

The current center offers showers, lockers, tables and chairs, a free telephone and housing and health information provided by agencies that operate there a few hours each day.

The Margaret Kemp Campus would not only offer more services, but providers would always be on site. Many of the services would be for people who are not homeless but are struggling financially. For example, lunch could be offered to people who could afford to pay rent but have a difficult time paying for groceries.

A large component of the new center - one-third of the space - would be for job training. That part would be supervised by Goodwill Industries and Truman Medical Behavioral Health Rehabilitation Program, **Kauk** said. The kind of training offered would be flexible, she said.

"It would have a direct relationship with employers and meet emerging vocational demands in the community," **Kauk** said.

Clyde McQueen, president and chief executive of the Full Employment Council, said what is needed is a total approach to helping the homeless get and retain jobs.

"There have been scattered efforts to bring job training," he said. "There has been one organization here and another there.

"Workers need to have a stable address. They need a consistent telephone number and a place to rest. The key aspect of this is they are focusing all these efforts together."

Providing job training is key to ending homelessness, said **Michael Stoops**, acting executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C.

"The majority of homeless people are able bodies and what they need most is a job that pays a living wage so they can afford housing," **Stoops** said.

John McIlwain, senior fellow at the Urban Land Institute in Washington, D.C., said centralizing services was a plus.

Portland, Ore., Miami-Dade County and Atlanta have built similar centers recently.

Baltimore has just started construction on one.

"No question that that is the way to provide services to the homeless," **McIlwain** said.

Susan Engel, director of community services at Catholic Charities, agreed.

"As an agency that is going to be housed there, we are very excited," she said.

Engel said she recently saw the value of synergy among service providers while working with hurricane evacuees at the Gregg Community Center.

"The agencies work together and it was easy for the evacuees to go from one table to the next," she said.

Kauk said the soonest construction could start would be in September 2006. She estimated it would take nine or 10 months to complete.

Sean O'Byrne, vice president of the Downtown Council of Kansas City, was a driving force on the task force when it began work on the project.

"I truly think it is a model for a lot of urban cores," O'Byrne said.

"I think people will see it and say Kansas City got it right."

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About the campus

The campus would be open as early as 5:30 a.m. to serve breakfast and open in the evenings for youth programs. Some part of the campus would be open every day.

It would include such things as computers, a fitness center with treadmills and exercise bicycles, art and music therapy classes, and a dining area that also would serve as a recreation center.

Among the on-site providers: Kansas City Public Library, Legal Aid of Western Missouri, Guadalupe Center, Swope Health Services, VA Services and the Kansas City Police Department's Community Action Network.

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