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FALL 2024

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Harvey Hall Sr. has formed a nonprofit organization, Be Neighbors Affordable Housing for Veterans, to develop and manage an 18-unit tiny house community that he hopes to locate on the east side of Springfield. However, the Springfield City Council recently tabled his request for \$400,000 that would be used to build a resource center after neighbors expressed objections to the project. COURTESY OF MELOTTE MORSE LEONATTI

Tiny houses, big controversy

Proposed development for homeless veterans hits snags at City Council

By David Blanchette

Tiny homes have generated big discussion recently as the Springfield City Council tries to decide if it should provide financial backing for a resource center that would serve a planned east-side housing development for homeless veterans.

As of press time the proposal by the city to commit \$400,000 in federal Community Development Block Grant funds toward the Be Neighbors tiny homes development had been tabled pending further discussion among the developers, Ward 2 Ald. Shawn Gregory and residents of the ward. The city's funding commitment would pay for a Learning, Technology and Resource Center that would provide support and training for the residents of the development's 18

separate, small residences.

Neighbors of the proposed development slated for 2835 Stanton St. appeared at a Sept. 17 City Council meeting to object to the funding plan, saying there are too many unanswered questions about the project.

"We are not getting the answers that we are requesting. It was sold to us that these tiny homes would be permanent homes, that they would be owned by these veterans," said Teresa Haley, a neighborhood association representative and longtime community activist. "But we found out that these tiny homes would receive vouchers from the (Springfield) Housing Authority which would have to be renewed every year. That sounds more like

public housing than permanent housing with people owning their homes."

Haley and other neighborhood residents feel that Be Neighbors is only asking for the \$400,000 resource center monies to leverage project funding from the Illinois Housing Development Authority, which has already committed \$4.8 million toward the tiny homes project. Julia Cave from the city of Springfield's Office of Planning and Economic Development, which held a Sept. 16 hearing on the \$400,000 request, confirmed that is one reason why the developers have asked the city for its support.

"IHDA wants the organization to put down 10% and then IHDA pays 90%. Be

Neighbors needed \$400,000 for their match,” Cave said. “That’s when we decided that we would propose to fund construction of their Learning, Technology and Resource Center.”

Frank McNeil, a former Ward 2 alderman who now serves on the city’s Economic Development Commission, voted against the proposal during the Sept. 16 hearing.

“The residents in the area are adamantly opposed to it,” McNeil said. “Is this going

to be a place where homeless individuals begin to drift into the area? While it’s 18 single houses, those people have friends and relatives, and how are you going to control that?”

McNeil also said that the Be Neighbors development is planned for an area that already has many social service facilities.

“Not everything should be on the east side of Springfield,” McNeil said. “To locate everything on the east side of Springfield

is not representative of a city that wants to embrace the situation and really do something about it.”

The Economic Development Commission ultimately voted 7 to 3 to forward the \$400,000 request for the city-administered federal funds to the City Council with a recommendation for approval. However, the EDC’s vote is non-binding, and the request was tabled during a Sept. 17 council meeting after lengthy discussion led by Gregory, the alderman who represents the area in question.

“I met with the community and they are very, very much against this. It was sold to them as one thing, and it’s not that,” Gregory said. “I have a high respect for Mr. Harvey Hall (the developer). If Mr. Hall can get it together with the neighborhood associations, then I’ll bring it out of committee. We cannot put people who need services in a place where there are no services. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

Ward 3 Ald. Roy Williams Jr. agreed with Gregory, and advised his fellow council members to think hard before approving the Be Neighbors request.

“We always talk about respecting the neighborhood associations, but we have yet to respect the east side,” Williams said. “We keep finagling and figuring ways to put it over there anyway. There are seven other wards in other parts of town where some of these facilities could go. It’s time for you guys to step up.”

Mayor Misty Buscher offered to coordinate a meeting among Be Neighbors, interested aldermen and the impacted neighborhood associations, a proposal to which all parties agreed. The council then tabled the funding request, but not before Ward 1 Ald. Chuck Redpath observed, “Everybody knows that a tabling vote is a death penalty for an ordinance.”

Be Neighbors Affordable Housing for Veterans, Inc., a nonprofit organization, received IHDA funding in 2021 to develop and operate 18 tiny, 540-square-foot homes with what was billed at the time as a 1,200-square-foot education center in the middle of the community. The Stanton Street property was rezoned for the development later that year. Be Neighbors could still build the entire complex, including the resource center, without further city review if the organization can privately come up with the \$400,000 it is seeking through the city council.

Harvey Hall Sr., the president of Be Neighbors, is a former U.S. Marine who

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said he experienced homelessness in the 1980s and can relate to what other veterans are experiencing. He made his case for the funding during a Sept. 3 City Council meeting.

“There are other avenues to get the funding to get this done. We are (asking) the city to be a part of this great project for our veterans,” Hall said. “We have already been funded for the houses, and the Springfield Housing Authority has already guaranteed me 18 vouchers for each house. So with the \$400,000, you will be saying that we also support our veterans here in Springfield.”

Hall garnered chuckles when he boasted that the tiny homes development would rival other noteworthy things in Springfield.

“This is going to be the second-greatest thing in this city next to Abraham Lincoln’s Tomb,” Hall said. “All over the United States they are going to want to take this model and do this for their veterans.”

T. David Parker of Melotte Morse Leonatti Parker, Ltd., is the project architect.

“This project was developed from the vision of Harvey Hall to create an environment where our veterans experiencing homelessness can find a place to stay and heal as needed,” Parker said. “The concept is to give each veteran a place of their own and a central services building to remove potential issues related to control of their environment and to remove barriers to getting any help they need from social services by having those on site.”

Parker added that the tiny homes proposal has already been reviewed to a very high standard.

“The project has gone through three years of rigorous testing through the IHDA Permanent Supportive Housing program,” Parker said. “That program requires demonstration of viability for a 15-year period, including maintenance and upkeep as well as maintaining social services.”

East-side neighbors still aren’t convinced. As Haley told the City Council, “We are concerned about our safety. There a lot of people, including veterans, with mental health issues,” she said. “I have grandchildren who literally catch the school bus across the street from where these tiny homes are supposed to be.”



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Sweet Basil Cafe on Springfield's west side closed Aug. 23. The owner previously served prison time for forgery, insurance fraud and other charges related to his previous business ventures. PHOTO BY MICHELLE OWNBEY

Sweet Basil owner addresses sudden closure

Former employee alleges history of bounced checks, utility shutoffs

By Scott Reeder

Billie Dent was waitressing at Sweet Basil Café last month when she and about 20 coworkers learned they were out of work the hard way – Sangamon County sheriff's deputies arrived and evicted the restaurant from the building.

"We had one table of customers in there at the time; we asked if they could finish their meal and the deputy was like, 'Yeah.' And then they proceeded to have the locksmiths change the locks," she said.

Dent, a mother of nine, said it was a struggle to get her final paycheck.

She said she phoned her former employer and said, "I just want what you owe me for work." According to Dent, he said, "Aren't you on public aid?" and hung up.

She was not alone in wanting to be paid.

Sangamon County court records show that the landlord was awarded a judgement for \$116,230: \$114,703 in rent plus \$327 in court costs and \$1,200 in attorney's fees.

The company's website still lists the Springfield location at 4241 Conestoga

Drive, along with other restaurants in Champaign, Peoria, Rockford, Skokie and Hanover Park.

Sweet Basil Cafe's legal problems appear to extend beyond Springfield. On Jan. 11, a Chicago law firm, Justicia Laboral LCC, filed a class-action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois alleging that the parent company for Sweet Basil Cafe violated the Illinois Minimum Wage Law and Fair Labor Standards Act. That case is pending.

Dent said money has been a continual issue for the restaurant, which opened in Springfield in 2020.

"People were getting paid, (but) they were never getting paid on time," she said. "I was there for three-and-a-half years. When I first started, our paydays were Sunday. We would never get paid until Monday. No big deal, because you can't cash a check on Sunday anyway. Well, then Mondays would come, and we wouldn't get paid, or they would write us a check off of a different

account, and we would bounce them. At one time, nobody would cash their checks in Springfield – no banks, currency exchange, Walmart – because their checks bounce."

The Illinois Secretary of State website lists Jim and Denise Karonis of Riverwoods, Illinois, as managers for The Sweet Basil Group, which has its principal address in Peoria. The business entity's status is listed as "involuntarily dissolution" as of Aug. 9.

Jim Karonis told *Illinois Times* he recently changed his first name to Dimitri, which he said is the Greek form of James. He was initially known as James Karonis prior to other legal problems, after which he started listing himself as Jim on official documents.

He insisted that the Springfield café was doing well.

"(Paychecks) were late because we live several hours away. ... But there were no financial difficulties. And when we left, we paid everybody and we walked away," he said.

But Dent remembers things differently.

“Every other month, CWLP was coming to turn off our lights because they weren’t paying the bill,” she said. “We would literally have to call them after they turned the lights off, like, ‘Hey, Denise, the city just turned off the power.’ And we would have to sit there for an hour, two hours or three hours, until they paid the bill and the city would come back out and turn the lights on.”

Dent said Springfield employees eventually received their final paychecks.

As for the back rent, Karonis said he believes the judgment against him is in error. He said his lawyer was tied up in federal court in Chicago at the same time as the Springfield hearing so the judge did not have an opportunity to hear his side of the story.

He contends that the original landlord granted him the building rent-free for one year but when someone new purchased the building, the owner demanded to be paid rent for the period under the previous owner.

This is not the first time Karonis has been in the news. A 2001 *Chicago Tribune* article said he was sentenced to six years in state prison for forgery, insurance fraud, aggravated insurance fraud, arson and organizing a conspiracy to commit aggravated insurance fraud.

According to the *Tribune*, one common scam Karonis used was claiming that a fire extinguisher accidentally discharged, causing a financial loss in terms of spoiled food and lost business. Prosecutors argued that those incidents were staged.

At several of his businesses and homes, he used forged sales slips to make phony claims that lightning had struck the building and ruined electronic equipment, the article stated.

While speaking with IT, Karonis blamed his criminal convictions on a “bad divorce” and a “bitter woman.”

“In my opinion, (there are those) that deserve to be in prison, and there are many people that ... don’t deserve to be in there. And when you go through a bad, bad divorce, people do crazy things and say things and do things.”

Scott Reeder, a staff writer for Illinois Times, can be reached at sreeder@illinoistimes.com.

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Joyner Construction Services is clearing land in the 3100-3200 blocks of Mercantile Drive in preparation for construction of a new apartment complex on the west side.
PHOTO BY DARON WALKER

Joyner Construction to build new apartment complex on west side

By Michelle Ownbey

After receiving zoning approval from the Springfield City Council, developer Corky Joyner has more than 250 additional apartments in the works for the west side.

Joyner is president of Joyner Construction Services Inc., a Springfield general contracting and construction management company.

“We have a pretty long waitlist on our two projects on the west side,” Joyner said, referring to the Cobblestone and Ash Grove apartment complexes he previously developed. Joyner said he currently has 380 apartments on the west side, but “we haven’t had a vacancy in our apartments in years. People move in and out, but we always have a waitlist and there are times we don’t even take more names.”

Joyner is now clearing a parcel of land in the 3100-3200 blocks of Mercantile Drive just south of AMC Showplace 12, although

he said it will be at least another year before he breaks ground. He successfully petitioned to downzone the land from B-1 and I-1 zoning to R-5(b) zoning, which would allow for multifamily use. The city council unanimously approved the request at its Sept 17 meeting.

“We’re still expanding our project in Rochester, so we’re going to concentrate on that to make sure we get to the light at the end of the tunnel,” he said.

“We’ll put (the land) in wheat so it’s productive and hopefully start construction a year from now – maybe even a year-and-a-half or two years. We have to go through the subdivision process, large-scale development process, building permit process,” Joyner said.

He said the new apartment complexes will be very similar the ones built in Ash Grove.

“We’re not planning to build anything we haven’t already built at least once,” Joyner said. “You train all these guys; there’s no reason to reinvent things all over again.”

“Our standard 12-plex has worked really well and been very popular,” Joyner said. “In Cobblestone, because of the way the zoning got done and things we were forced to agree to, we don’t have any garages there. But this (complex) will have more in common with Ash Grove – attached garages are very popular.”

Despite increases in interest rates and construction costs, Joyner said, “The apartment business has been very stable for us... We’ve got good locations and a good product, and it’s up to us to continue to maintain them and keep everything going smoothly.”

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