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'Sober house' for men proposed in Old Hailey

Neighbors form legal opposition

Tony Evans Aug 15, 2018

A nonprofit organization is forming in the Wood River Valley with plans to bring a residential addiction-recovery home for men, or “sober house,” to Hailey.

The proposed home’s location has some neighbors concerned enough that they have mounted a legal campaign to block the plan.

“This would be the first of its kind in the valley,” said Blaine County drug court coordinator Sonya Wilander. “It would fill a gap in this community and it is much needed, especially for men.”

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Wilander is an East Fork resident who spearheaded the plan after working as a volunteer coordinator for five years at the 5th District drug court, a jail diversion program for addicts that serves Blaine County.

Drug courts are teams of people, including attorneys, judges, medical personnel and parole officers, who work with the judicial system to keep alcoholics and addicts out of jail and, instead, in recovery.

“Sober house” is a generic term for a residential support program for those in recovery from addictions and/or fulfilling the terms of probation for felony or misdemeanor offenses. The cities of Twin Falls and Boise have numerous sober houses.

The chosen location for the proposed sober house is 220 S. Second Ave., in the city of Hailey's Transitional zone in the Town Site Overlay District. The zone's purpose is to provide a buffer between residential and business areas. The home is under contract for sale to an as-yet anonymous donor.

According to Wilander, the home would house up to eight men and be overseen by a house manager charged with making sure the residents abide by certain rules.

No drugs, alcohol or firearms would be allowed on the premises. Random drug testing and personal article searches would be conducted to make sure residents comply with the rules.

Wilander said she partnered with The Advocates nonprofit organization to gain its support as a fiscal sponsor. The Advocates sponsorship has allowed Wilander's project, called Men's Second Chance Living, to collect donations while awaiting certification as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

Wilander said she has raised about \$200,000 for the operation of a sober house, in addition to a promise from a donor to purchase the property.

A group of Hailey residents with property close to the proposed sober house location, including Chauncy Gardner, hired attorney Mike Pogue last month to try to block the project.

Gardner said he found out about the sober house plan when a website featuring the proposed location, and application forms for residents, appeared on the internet. Wilander said it was a test website and was accidentally posted. The website has since been taken down.

"I'm concerned that the [sober house] group is putting the cart before the horse," Gardner said. "I get the sense they're excited to do something good, but I don't feel confident that they're qualified to run it in such a way that the neighbors would feel secure."

Pogue wrote a letter on July 31 to the home purchaser's attorney, Franklin G. Lee, stating that the proposed use constitutes "health care and social assistance" and/or a "boarding and rooming house" and therefore would be prohibited in the Transitional zone.

Pogue also said in an email that he believes the sober-house project would be in violation of the Americans With Disabilities Act, but provided no further details.

Hailey Community Development Director Lisa Horowitz said in an interview that the board of the nonprofit organization supporting the sober house has replied to the complaint.

"The group feels that they would fall under a state statute regarding single-family dwellings that would supersede any local zoning laws," Horowitz said.

State law 67-6531 defines a single-family dwelling as including “any home in which eight or fewer unrelated mentally and/or physically handicapped or elderly persons reside; and who are supervised. ...”

“What I have been told is that those in addiction recovery have a disability,” said Horowitz, a designation that, if approved, could allow the sober house to proceed unhindered.

Horowitz said city staff has asked for legal counsel from the Association of Idaho Cities to confirm how other municipalities in the state have categorized sober houses.

“If there is no building permit involved, they may not even have to come to City Hall,” Horowitz said.

Wilander said residents of the sober house would be employed, and would manage and maintain the property as part of their tenant agreement.

“These men are already a part of our community,” she said. “People ask me whether I would want to live next to the sober house. After working at the drug court, I certainly would.”

Email the writer: tevans@mtexpress.com

“It would fill a gap in this community and it is much needed, especially for men.”

Sonya Wilander

Blaine County drug court coordinator

Sober living

For many men in the Wood River Valley who struggle with drug addiction and alcoholism, finding a place to live adds a degree of difficulty to maintaining their sobriety.

Austin (not his real name) is in his early 40s and lives in Hailey. He was released from jail last fall after serving time for a possession-of-methamphetamine conviction. He will be two years sober in September, and met Sonya Wilander through the Blaine County drug court program.

Austin has tried to get sober in the past, and struggled to find housing. Several years ago, he was only able to rent a hotel room in Bellevue, and relapsed as the bills added up.

After getting out last fall, Austin said, he was living with his mother in Lincoln County and commuting to the Wood River Valley to work full time or visit his four children.

"If there would have been a sober-living place, it would have been a place for me to come to," he said. "I buckled down and I stayed clean. I made a commitment to myself. It's a lot for somebody who hasn't been responsible for a long time. I got through it all. My life is really good right now. I've been able to actually be a father."

He feels fortunate to be able to move into a place in Hailey with a roommate who is also sober, which happened in the spring. He said he understands that others may not be so fortunate, and some recovering alcoholics or addicts have to make their first steps in sobriety while living in a campground or in their cars.

"I live and I work in the valley and I'm on parole," he said. "A lot of my neighbors don't know who or what I'm about. We're everywhere. What about the guy living out of his car? It's a huge opportunity for the valley to step up and support these guys." (By PETER JENSEN—Express staff writer)

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Chauncy Gardner

Hailey resident

Tony Evans