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NEWS

HOMELESS SHELTER PLAN RUNS UP AGAINST MOVE TO REOPEN OPERA HOUSE

By Charlene Prost Of The Post-Dispatch

Donald Breckenridge's plan to reopen Kiel Opera House has run into an unlikely obstacle: a shelter and assistance center for the homeless. And if the Rev. Larry Rice is successful in what he says will be an all-out campaign to expand his New Life Evangelistic Center into a federally owned building alongside the Opera House, Breckenridge says his plan will come to an end.

"I'm not unsympathetic with the homeless, but there is a right place for everything," Breckenridge said. "We need the building for parking for the Opera House.

And we don't think having a homeless shelter there is a compatible use. It would kill the Opera House."

At the center of what's shaping up to be a battle involving city and federal officials is the four-story L. Douglas Abram Federal Building at 1520 Market Street. The General Services Administration now has the building on the sale block.

St. Louis officials, who have promised to do all they can to help reopen the historic Opera House, have been working with Breckenridge and his associates for months on plans to convert most of the Abram building into parking for a reopened Opera House.

Officials at Savvis Center, who would lease the city-owned Opera House to Breckenridge, said they won't approve a lease unless he builds about 1,500 more parking spaces. They would be in addition to 1,248 spaces at Savvis' existing garage that would be available when events happened at both Savvis and the Opera House.

Mark Sauer, president and chief executive for Savvis and the Blues hockey team, said Thursday that the only suitable place for the additional parking is the Abram building. Another site considered previously - just east of Savvis - would be too far away, Sauer said. And Barbara Geisman, deputy mayor for development, said a garage east of Savvis had turned out to be "not financially feasible."

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"We need the parking next door to the Opera House," Sauer said. "If the federal building cannot be converted for parking, then we will lose this opportunity for Don Breckenridge to reopen the Opera House."

Steven Miller, general manager of the company that manages Union Station, said parking isn't the only issue.

"Having a homeless shelter at the federal building on Market Street, the city's main drag, would be absolutely the worst thing," Miller said. "It could do us an enormous amount of damage."

Rice said the Abram building is the only downtown building he knows of that's suitable and available for providing shelter and other desperately needed services for the increasing homeless population. And he, too, has backing, including a federal law that favors the homeless when federal property is up for grabs.

Under the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, enacted by Congress in 1987, the GSA and other federal agencies involved in disposing of federal property are required to give priority to projects to assist the homeless, if the projects get approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Under this act, Rice would get the building at no cost. The city would have to buy it based on its appraised value.

Shirley Kramer, realty specialist at the Health and Human Services Department in Rockville, Md., said she's reviewing Rice's proposal to make sure it's viable, has sufficient financial backing and meets other criteria. She said she expected to make a decision in the coming weeks.

John Robinson, project manager at the GSA's Real Property Disposal Division in Fort Worth, Texas, said if Rice's proposal passes muster at Kramer's office, the Abram probably will go to Rice.

"There is always some wiggle room" in federal laws and regulations, he said. "But the law says the homeless have priority, and it would be very rare to have a situation with such merit that we would deviate."

Rice envisions moving homeless women, children and families to the Abram from New Life's crowded headquarters, at 1411 Locust Street. That location would be reserved for homeless men. He'd also set aside space at the Abram for social service organizations to provide child care, nursing and health care, job placement and other assistance. He said he'd have a cafeteria, a store stocked with free clothing, furniture and other necessities, and enough room for job training, educational classes and other services the homeless need to get back on their feet.

Brett Dempsey, assistant vice president at Cass Bank, said the bank has conditionally approved a line of credit for up to \$3 million to pay for renovating and operating the Abram building as a shelter, at least initially.

Rice also has letters of support from several agencies and seven state legislators and aldermen. But at least one of them, Rep. Tom Villa, D-St. Louis, withdrew his support this week after learning that the city and Breckenridge also want the building.

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"I think there are probably other buildings in St. Louis that we could retrofit for a homeless facility," Villa said. "It seems to me that a better public use (for the building) would be to get the Opera House to work."

St. Louis Comptroller Darlene Green had similar views.

"Don Breckenridge needs the building for parking, for docking purposes, for office space and educational space. We encourage developments like that so there can be more jobs for the homeless," Green said. ". . . We think there are other solutions elsewhere for the homeless."

Breckenridge said he'll meet this month with GSA officials to try to show them the importance of his project. The price tag of \$35.5 million includes \$7.5 million that would be spent at the Abram building.

His plan calls for renovating and reopening the 1934 Opera House's main 3,500-seat auditorium, four smaller theaters around it and its Kiel club area, all closed since 1991 so Savvis Center could be built.

Rice said he, too, supports reopening the Opera House, and having a homeless shelter next door could be an asset. "Instead of having people sleeping and freezing in the park across the street from the Opera House, they'd have a place to go," he said.

GRAPHIC, MAP, PHOTO (1) Color photo by J.B. FORBES/POST-DISPATCH - Concrete bears guard the Market Street entrance to the old Kiel Opera House. Developer Don Breckenridge wants the L. Douglas Abram Federal Building (right) converted into parking. The Rev. Larry Rice wants to use the building as an expanded homeless shelter. (2) Color Graphic/Map by the Post-Dispatch - Plan for reopening Kiel Opera House hits snag Kiel Opera House Savvis Center Abram federal building Surface parking lot

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