

Beans and Bread awaits upgrades

Administrators of Beans and Bread and opponents of a \$4.5 million renovation and expansion to its resource center agree that clients should wait for services inside the facility, rather than on the street.

On many other points, however, there is disagreement among the two parties.

St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore has operated a resource center in Fells Point since 1986, and since 1992 at 402 S. Bank Street, two blocks west of Broadway, where it provides transitional housing for 20 men, serves an average of 289 free lunches per day and offers an assortment of services, from a mail drop to job counseling.

In June of this year, St. Vincent de Paul announced plans for an expansion of the facility, which was met by objections in the surrounding community, a dispute that went to mediation.

Last month, the Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals, a division of the Baltimore City Planning Department, granted several variances to St. Vincent de Paul.

That decision has been appealed by neighboring property owners, including Deirdre Hammer, president of the Douglass Place Neighborhood Association. It could be several months before that appeal will be heard in Circuit Court.

“We hope that construction can begin next spring,” said project manager Lisa Knickmeyer, emphasizing that Beans and Bread wants to increase its ability to serve its existing clients, not increase their numbers.

“We’re not opposed to the mission of Beans and Bread,” Hammer said, “but when they say they’re not increasing the number of people they’re serving, that’s not true. I want to see them at the same capacity they’re at now.”

Knickmeyer insists that will be the case.

“Our priority is to work with individuals who are homeless, or at risk to become homeless,” she said. “People assume we’ll be getting more clients, but the goal is to better serve our existing clients.”

Knickmeyer said that the dining room, which serves in shifts of 36, will not expand. What is planned to grow is the inside waiting area, which currently consists of four church pews.

“Right now, clients line up outside for the meal program,” Knickmeyer said. “The bulk of the new space will provide for a great room with seating and a corridor that will act as inside queue space.”

To create that space and a new entrance on Bank Street, St. Vincent de Paul purchased an adjoining warehouse, which was leveled last month. The project will also add disabled ramps.

In addition to its lunch program and transitional housing in the adjoining Frederick Ozanam House, Beans and Bread provides services for 28 chronically homeless individuals who reside throughout the city through its Home Connections program.

Knickmeyer said that city zoning limits Beans and Bread to 20 employees.

“In reality, we’re adding one workspace,” Knickmeyer said. “We’re increasing the number of offices and decreasing the number of cubicles. Privacy is a goal. Screening for HIV in the middle of a room is inappropriate.”

A corner of the pantry, meanwhile, serves as a workspace.

“More room would be ideal,” said Pam Perc, a parishioner of the Catholic Community of St. Michael/St. Patrick in Fells Point and a Beans and Bread volunteer since 1999. “We’re pretty cramped.”

Perc spoke Nov. 19, a few days after a part-time employee of Beans and Bread was arrested and charged in the stabbing of a client, bringing the resource center negative publicity.

“I’ve never had a problem here,” Perc said. “I love being here and talking to the people. Our faces might be the only ones the clients see today that are smiling.”

Much of the work at Beans and Bread is done by volunteers, notably from Loyola University Maryland, which has helped since 1992, including serving a meal on the

last Sunday of the month.

“There are a multitude of stereotypes out there about people who are materially poor and living on the street,” said Sister Katherine “Missy” Gugerty, the director of community service and justice for the university.

“They give our students a glimpse of their reality, of what they’ve been through with poverty and homelessness. In reality, it rarely matches the negative stereotypes our students have learned. We treasure the work that Beans and Bread does, and the fact that they allow us to be a part of the good work they’re doing.”

Lost in the recent controversy, Knickmeyer said, is the good that the resource center provides.

“Regardless of what people say, Beans and Bread has been a good neighbor,” Knickmeyer said. “Because of Beans and Bread, 106 people have been put in permanent housing the last two years.”