

Homeless-shelter permit OK'd

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SANTA CRUZ — Despite strong objections from neighbors, Zoning Board members Thursday approved a permit for the New Life Center, a Bible-oriented group, to legalize its shelter for the homeless on Fair Avenue.

The center has been operating a shelter there for at least a few months, but never had a permit to do so, according to Planning Department documents.

The center did obtain a permit in 1973 allowing six of its staff to stay there, but "there was no permit to house any homeless persons," said Zoning Administrator Jeff Redding.

The Christian organization has been running an alcohol- and drug-treatment center and Bible-study program at facilities at 707 Fair Ave. since 1972.

Redding said center officials may "very well have thought" the 1973 permit allowed them to run a shelter.

Board members approved a permit for a 25-bed facility. Board member Mark Primack dissented. Among other things, Primack objected to a condition of the permit banning single men from staying in the shelter.

"I don't know if this is the place to admit it, but I was once a single

man," said Primack.

City Manager Richard Wilson said today he would ask the City Attorney if it is legal to ban single men. The permit allows for women, children and families. The ban was imposed after residents testified they were worried about crimes being committed in the neighborhood by strange men, wandering around their streets.

New Life Center spokesman Steve Stiles and county Shelter Project coordinator Paul Brindel, whose agency funnels public funds to the center, said the center has been providing shelter to as many as 25 homeless persons at existing facilities — even though it had no permit to do so.

Following the hearing, Stiles told a reporter the center was housing 22 people Thursday night.

At a public hearing lasting almost two hours Primack asked Stiles if Stiles has had close to 25 persons staying at the center on any night.

"Yes," replied Stiles.

Under questioning from Primack, Brindel told board members the sheltering of that many people without the permit to do so has been done "with absolute honesty with public officials."

He said his agency has been operating under the premise that "we don't have the authority" to turn people away.

"It's absolutely a sin not to let the

shelter take in (the homeless)," Brindel told board members.

Following the decision, Brindel was asked by a reporter what City Council members were aware the shelter was operating without the proper permit.

Brindel declined to answer: "We told the truth. I wouldn't want to compromise anyone (by naming names)," said Brindel.

In an interview this morning, City Manager Richard Wilson said city officials were not aware New Life Center was providing shelter for that many persons without a permit.

"We would not have been able to give them permission to do so (without a public hearing on permit request)," said Wilson.

Brindel testified at the hearing he has dealt with New Life Center during the past three years and that the center has always operated with "impeccable honesty."

In an interview following the hearing, Brindel and Stiles said the center started to shelter more than six persons sometime in December, or around the time that another shelter project planned by Catholic Soup Kitchen Founder Peter Carota fell through.

Carota announced in late November his plans not materialized for a permanent shelter on Golf Club Drive. In early December, Carota

obtained a 120-day permit from the Zoning Board for a 25-bed shelter at the Soup Kitchen on Mora Street.

Brindel said the New Life Center had received about \$21,000 in public funds for last fiscal year and hopes to receive a \$10,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for next year.

Board members tied the permit approval to a review in six months.

The center would have to obtain an occupancy permit before operating the 25-bed shelter. The occupancy permit cannot be issued until 10 days are allowed for an appeal to be filed.

Opposing residents were divided into two groups. They were either opposed to the shelter altogether or supported it as long as there were no more than 25 persons allowed.

Resident Tom Vlassis, an opponent to permit approval, told board members Stiles had told him the center had been operating a shelter for up to 25 persons for about one year, without a permit or variance. "This shows a disregard for legal requirements," said Vlassis.

Vlassis and other residents said they were concerned about the safety of their children, the crime rate, and strangers wandering about the neighborhood.

Residents testified there are three homes for the mentally retarded in the neighborhood. They felt the neighborhood — which is zoned for single-family residences — was being overrun by social-service agencies.

Petitions from more than 245 concerned residents were submitted to board members.

Several residents said they had been told by center officials that the shelter would be expanding above the 25-bed limit.

Under questioning from board members, Stiles said he had been misquoted by residents about expansion plans.

He said the center has no "definite" plans for future expansion.

As a condition of permit approval, board members required the center to submit a report about progress on relocating the shelter in a different area.

The shelter is to be closed during the day. According to center rules, those who stay will be required to look for work and permanent housing during daytime hours. Length of stays were limited to 45 consecutive days.