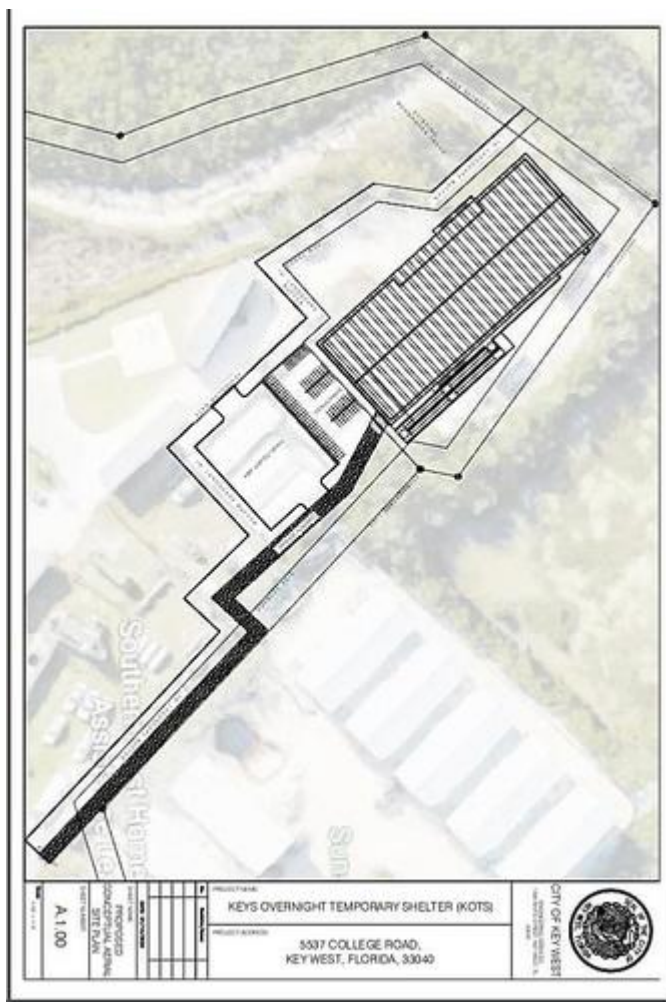


# City gets look at new KOTS plan

By PRU SOWERS Key West Citizen January 17, 2020



The Key West City Commission received its first look Wednesday at plans for a renovated homeless shelter on Stock Island, but still needs to find the money to fund its construction.

City Engineering Director Steve McAlearney presented a draft design of a new Keys Overnight Shelter that stays in its current location next to the Monroe County Sheriff's

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Office but would be moved back from College Road to create a buffer between KOTS clients and neighboring property owners.

The design won a thumbs-up from commissioners and a variety of homeless advocates. It will be built out of pre-fabricated metal on stilts. A walkway will lead clients from College Road through a heavily-landscaped area to the building, which will have space for residents to gather under the building. Neighbors and the next-door Monroe County Sheriff's Office have complained that KOTS clients wait along College Road for the shelter to open in the evening, presenting both aesthetic and safety issues.

An Americans With Disabilities Act ramp will lead up to the elevated building, which will have beds for 56 women and 88 men in separate quarters. Offices, a kitchen and an air-conditioned gathering room are also included in the design, which will allow for a 24-hour facility instead of the current overnight-only shelter if city commissioners decide to expand services.

The current KOTS facility is in poor shape, said City Manager Greg Veliz and needs to be replaced as soon as possible.

"As far as it's useful life, it's very bad," he told commissioners. "Now, we're just holding it together."

The challenge now is where to find the \$3 million McAlearney it will cost to build the new shelter. There is no money set aside in this year's budget for the project. However, there is a private individual who has said he will match an unnamed amount of money raised for the building, Veliz said.

There may be another approximately \$1.7 million available from the Key West Affordable Housing Trust Fund that can be put toward the project, Budget Director Mark Finigan said. If the funding comes together, construction could begin sometime this year.

City and Monroe County government officials hammered out an agreement last year to build a new facility at its current location.

In other workshop discussion, commissioners were split on how to move ahead with affordable housing development. Funding versus timing was the issue. If the city wants to focus future developments on low and very-low income residents, as Commissioner Sam Kaufman argued for, it will take longer for a project to be built since the city will

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have to fund the project itself. If the city partners with developers, the project will take less time to complete but the developer will likely want to charge higher rents to recoup building costs.

"It's useless to endeavor to build affordable housing if it's truly not affordable," Kaufman said, adding that \$2,500 a month for a two-bedroom rental is too high.

Developers in a public-private partnership with the city have asked for rents aimed at median and moderate-income tenants, with a lower percentage for low and very-low income. But the advantage is the developers can complete a housing project faster than the city. And since there is a shortage of available housing in all four income levels, Mayor Johnston said perhaps timing should be the priority, not income level.

"I believe any [housing] unit that is in any of those four categories is going to be of benefit to our workforce," she said, adding that her own construction company has lost five employees recently, who moved out of Key West because they couldn't afford the high housing costs.

While the low and very-low income levels need help with housing, they are not the only ones, said commissioners Greg Davila and Jimmy Weekley.

"What good does it do to build low income only," Weekley asked. "The middle management of this community really is what makes it a community. That's our heart and soul; our teachers, our nurses, our law enforcement officers."

Several business owners spoke to the commission, citing the increasing loss of staff due to high housing costs. Bill Lay, owner of La Trattoria restaurant, said he has had four resignations from long-time staff recently.

"They're leaving the island because they simply can't afford it. No matter how much you pay somebody, this is a very expensive place to live," he said.

Joe Walsh, who owns several restaurants in Key West, said all four income levels need help. Take any opportunity to partner with a developer to create more housing, he urged.

"We need all of it," Walsh said. "We need lots more housing units."

"We have a crisis not five years down the road or 10 years down the road. We have a crisis right now," Johnston agreed.

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