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Halfway house gets rezoning OK

By CBC News
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A Calgary halfway house for paroled criminals has received the green light from city council to relocate to an industrial area despite passionate opposition from residents living west of the site.

A Calgary halfway house for paroled criminals got the green light Monday from city council to relocate to an industrial area despite passionate opposition from residents living west of the site.

With the approval to change the land use designation, the Calgary John Howard Society can build Bedford House in Manchester, a light industrial park just east of Macleod Trail at Builders Road S.E.

The halfway house is currently located in Victoria Park, but that property has been expropriated for expansion of the Calgary Stampede grounds, forcing the society to move to the new site near the 39th Avenue LRT station.

Some councillors supported the rezoning because of the society's rehabilitation work. Only two - Brian Pincott and Diane Colley-Urquhart - voted against it.

"I heard quite clearly from my constituents that they didn't want this," said Pincott, whose ward includes the proposed site.

Wearing green buttons that said, "Do the right thing," people from the neighbourhoods of Britannia, Elboya Heights and Parkhill Stanley Park lined up to tell councillors their concerns about living near convicted criminals, especially if there are sex offenders among the halfway house's clientele.

Thu Libin, who has a son and is expecting a second child, told council she won't feel safe walking in her neighbourhood with ex-convicts not far away.

"I don't even know their qualifications on who they accept, how many are pedophiles, which is my main concern as the mother of a two-year-old and one coming," said Libin, who lives in Parkhill.

"They're going to be immediately adjacent to our areas so it's not fair," said Bryan Curtis, vice-president of the Elboya Community Association. "We have a right to be concerned about our safety. And our safety shouldn't be impacted anymore than if that facility was there or not there."

Rezoning passes with amendments

To address community concerns, the John Howard Society scaled back the proposed number of beds from 40 to 32. Executive director Gordon Sands also said the new facility would only house diagnosed pedophiles if they were electronically monitored.

At open houses in May, the society presented statistics emphasizing the low re-offence rate by people on conditional release.

On Monday, council approved the rezoning for Bedford House with a few amendments.

The John Howard Society will have to reapply to the city if it wants to increase its capacity to 40 beds, and it was encouraged to work on a "good neighbour" agreement with community associations in the area.

"I placed a series of amendments that works to address my residents' concerns about how they're going to operate and works to make sure that John Howard Society will work with the surrounding communities, and I think that's key," Pincott said.

In 2007, local opposition scuttled a plan to move the halfway house to the southwest community of Sunalta.

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