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Decision on new mental health facility moves to council

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After a split vote from the Anniston Planning Commission, it's up to the City Council to decide whether a mental health facility can move into a residential neighborhood on Leighton Avenue.

The commission discussed the zoning change during its meeting Tuesday night. The council is set to consider the issue during its meeting at the end of September.

More than 30 people crowded into the meeting space at Anniston City Hall Tuesday night to discuss the pros and cons of the Calhoun-Cleburne Mental Health Board opening a facility at 2222 Leighton Ave. The property was once an assisted living facility.

Mickey Turner, executive director of the mental health board, said the planned 16-bed mental health facility would cater to patients who were involuntarily committed or were experiencing a psychiatric crisis. Turner said the facility is needed because a lack of funding is forcing Alabama state hospitals to downsize and patients have nowhere to go.

At its last meeting, the commission discussed rezoning the district, currently R-3 to allow for high-density family dwellings, to a residential institutional professional (RIP) zone. However, the discussion was tabled until Tuesday's meeting where it was the only topic on the agenda. Several outspoken residents were angry that the commission's bylaws prohibited anyone who spoke at the previous meeting to voice their concerns Tuesday. The meeting was interrupted multiple times and Chairman Mark Hearn repeatedly warned audience members that they were out of order.

Several law enforcement officers, mental health officials and judges voiced their approval for the facility.

Calhoun County Probate Judge Alice Martin said petitions filed for civil commitment have increased in Calhoun County.

"We are in dire need of resources for mentally ill patients," Martin said.

As a probate judge, Martin gives orders to commit patients to a mental health facility after a petition is filed. The judge fielded concerns that many of the patients treated at the facility would be criminals by noting she could not commit someone with a pending felony charge to the facility in question.

"The problem I see here is the stigma that has always surrounded mental illness," Martin said. "It's the same stigma that causes those with mental illness to avoid treatment, for fear of being labeled a menace to society."

Sheriff Larry Amerson said many mentally ill patients are not able to take care of

themselves and need stabilization.

“We’re not here to put dangerous people in your community. We’re here to treat sick people and put them in a place where they can receive adequate treatment so they won’t get dangerous,” Amerson said.

Several people questioned why the facility was going to be located in a residential neighborhood instead of using land at McClellan. Turner said the mental health board considered property at McClellan, but it was too expensive. The facility on Leighton Avenue already has 16 bedrooms, Turner said.

Turner agreed to have security guards in place at the facility, even though they are not required by law, to ease the minds of people who live nearby.

Anniston Mayor Vaughn Stewart, a planning commission member, said he was not in favor of the facility at the location in question and voted against the motion. Stewart said he was against it during the last meeting and his feelings had not changed.

The mayor said he didn’t think the facility should be opened in a neighborhood where the residents do not want it.

Darline Ritchey said after the meeting that she lives at the corner of 22nd Street and Leighton Avenue and worries the facility will devalue her property.

“It’s a bad day for Anniston if this happens,” Ritchey said. “I don’t want to live in front of a place that needs security guards.”

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