

# 'New Hope House' Shelter Proposal Stirs Debate Among Alton Ward 1 Residents

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter  
March 21 2024 11:52 AM



ALTON - Several residents of Alton's first ward spoke for and against a proposed homeless shelter known as the "New Hope House" at 525 Alby St., adjacent to the Salvation Army, the organization behind the project. Questions, concerns, and clarifications about the shelter came to light at this month's Ward 1 meeting at Alton City Hall on Wednesday.

Travis Widman with Widman Construction, Inc. spoke in support of the Salvation Army and their proposed shelter, adding that it's one part of revitalizing a community he cares deeply about.

"I take a lot of pride in the City of Alton," Widman said, adding many of the city's unhoused come from the city itself. "They've been Alton residents for a long time - they are not getting bussed here, they're not getting trucked here, they're Alton residents.

"I'm all about the revitalization of this town, but one of the ways you revitalize a town is to revitalize some of the folks in it, and that's what we're trying to do."

### **New Hope House vs. Booth House**

Cassy Grey, the Madison County corps officer for the Salvation Army, shared some of the "success stories" made possible by making stable housing available to those who fall on hard times. She also said the New Hope House would have much more space for recreational areas than the Booth House, a former shelter run by the Salvation Army and torn down in 2021.

Grey said each room in the new facility would feature a kitchenette, bathroom, and personal storage space, and the facility would contain common areas for laundry and recreation - though it was later clarified the New Hope House is not 48 rooms as had been rumored, but contains 48 beds which can be added or removed from rooms as needed.

Several residents cited past negative experiences living near the Booth House and worried that similar negative experiences would follow the New Hope House's construction. One resident who lived nearby claimed the former property ran rampant with crime, while others expressed general discomfort at the idea of unhoused people being present and/or walking around their neighborhood.

In a Fact Sheet released by the Salvation Army about the project, the organization states that the New Hope House will not accommodate "people suffering from severe mental illness, severe health illness, severe drug and alcohol addictions, sex or violent offenders." It also does not "allow residents to possess or use alcohol or drugs of any kind."

Widman said earlier in the meeting that the Alton Chief of Police, Jarrett Ford, is fully aware and on board with the project and would be collaborating on security equipment

and protocols at the New Hope House. Salvation Army representatives have stated the New Hope House will “thoroughly review each applicant,” but some residents remained unconvinced, claiming the Booth House had an inadequate vetting process.

### **“Not In Our Neighborhood”**

Madison County Building & Zoning Administrator Chris Doucleff said neighborhood residents and county officials - some of whom are one in the same - were not made aware of the project, which he said is largely opposed by neighborhood residents.

“No one in the neighborhood was contacted about this, we found out last week. I’m the Building And Zoning Director for Madison County and I did not know about this,” Doucleff said. “Tom Haine, the State’s Attorney, lives in the neighborhood did not know about this. My sister who’s on the County Board did not know about this. It’s like you tried to sneak it through ... 95% of were adamantly opposed to this with no doubt about it. Even hearing your spin on everything, on how great it’s going to be, doesn’t change I bet you any of those minds because we have to live there, we live there every day.

“I think the people that live in the neighborhood take priority ... maybe an alternative or someplace else, but not in our neighborhood,” Doucleff continued. “The majority of people we talked to, they do not want it, and no spin can change our mind either, because we’ve seen it, we’ve lived it.”

Doucleff added he feels the new shelter would also threaten the preservation of the Middletown Historic District, with its river views and historic homes, adding: “we want to preserve the great town Alton is - this is not going to preserve, this is going to make it worse.”

Another resident raised concern about local property values shortly before a woman who claimed to be an experienced home appraiser said to Salvation Army representatives that the New Hope House would “crush” local home prices.

“I’ve appraised thousands of homes and I can tell you flat out, your project will crush the values of houses for blocks around, if not the entire City of Alton, and that’s all there is to it,” she said.

### **“Where Do You Suggest They Go?”**

With many residents not wanting Alton’s homeless population wandering the streets, being present anywhere in public, or living in a shelter in their neighborhood, one resident asked: “if you don’t want them anywhere, where do you suggest they go?”

One resident fired back: “Your house.”

A former Booth House worker said many individuals are “one paycheck away from being homeless” and criticized them for not supporting their unhoused neighbors.

“It is very disappointing to see all these people who are not willing to help their neighbors,” she said. “These are the same people that make your hamburgers, they make your food ... where do you think these people are going to go?”

“To be in a neighborhood and a city that would not encourage people that are only making low wages in the first place is inconsiderate, for one - you’re not helping your neighbors. I’m sorry, but you’re not.”

### **Mayor: “We Have To Do Something”**

Towards the end of the meeting, Alton Mayor David Goins acknowledged the passion on both sides of the debate, but encouraged community members to work together to find a solution.

“We’re trying to deal with this in the best way possible,” Goins said. “It's not going to be a thing where everybody is going to agree, but ... if we all can work together and try to put our heads together, try to come up with solutions to problems, because the Salvation Army what they do, will this take care of every homeless situation in our community? No. But will it help? Yes.

“There's a saying that says, ‘The only thing that needs to happen for evil to prevail is when good people do nothing,’ and so we have to do something.”

A recording of the Ward 1 meeting is available at the top of this story, on the [Riverbender.com Facebook page](#), or on [Riverbender.com/video](#).