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New housing for grandparents

by AnnMarie Costella , Chronicle Reporter

Calvary Baptist Church has proposed an innovative idea in Jamaica: constructing housing for elderly grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. The building would be located at the corner of Guy R. Brewer Boulevard and 112th Road.

Providing affordable housing for those individuals is an especially pressing concern since the government will not allow people who live in subsidized housing to take in grandchildren, because it would violate their rental agreement, according to Eric Palatnik, the attorney representing the church.

“A lot of times these grandparents are put into these awful situations where they have these grandchildren who need their care, they need their attention but they can’t take the grandkids because if they do, they lose the housing,” he explained at last week’s Community Board 12 meeting.

Seniors are often entrusted to care for grandchildren when parents are incapable of doing so, either because they have a medical condition, are incarcerated, or are battling substance abuse, amongst other reasons.

Sandra Sanders, the parent coordinator at P.S. 40 Samuel Huntington School in Jamaica, has seen those problems firsthand. She recalled how one 79-year-old grandparent who was raising her then 3-year-old granddaughter in a senior housing facility on Merrick Boulevard was asked to leave because of the arrangement.

“They put an eviction notice on my door and they took me to court,” the woman said in an interview this week. She did not want to give her name because she fears retaliation by the building’s management.

With the help of a lawyer from the Department of Aging, she won the case which had dragged on for over a year, thereby enabling her to stay. The woman’s son had been deported back to Jamaica after serving four years in prison on a drug-related charge and entrusted her with caring for his daughter when she was just 7 months old.

But finding places that allow grandchildren to live with their grandparents is not the only problem affecting guardians of advanced age. “Sometimes they just don’t have the energy,” Sanders explained.

Sanders often refers those seniors to a support group called Grandparents Empowered Active Response, or GEAR, a ministry of Calvary Baptist Church, and attends the meetings herself as well.

Mary Covington, the facilitator for GEAR, said the idea for the new nonprofit facility, which will be called Calvary Baptist Grandparent Family Apartments, came after one of the members of the group saw a newspaper article about a complex called Presbyterian Senior Services Grandparent Family Apartments, located at 163rd Street and Prospect Avenue in the Bronx. It is for seniors in the same situation.

“We thought it was ideal and it was just what we needed,” Covington said after visiting the facility with three grandparents from GEAR. “It was a great environment. They had all the social services that were needed, and this is the prototype that we wanted to follow.”



The housing complex Calvary Baptist Church seeks to build at Guy R. Brewer Boulevard and 112th Road. rendering courtesy D & F Development

Calvary Baptist Church is well versed in running senior facilities and already has one located at 160-60 Claude Avenue, called Calvary Baptist Senior Housing. It is a six-story building which was constructed 10 years ago after a 1991 rezoning and has 100 residents, mostly seniors and grandparents. Now, they want to create a second facility to better meet the growing needs of the community.

“Our ambition is to enhance the lives of grandparents raising their grandchildren,” said Deacon Kent Garrett, the chairman of the deacon ministry at the church. “We want them to have greater opportunities to become stronger citizens in the community.”

The new building would be five stories tall with a sixth story setback. The lot area is 25,731 square feet and would contain 79,999 square feet of total floor area.

The facility would have 67 units — 24 one-bedrooms, 34 two-bedrooms and nine three-bedrooms. The anticipated rent would be approximately 60 percent of the adjusted median income which would be \$750 to \$800 for a one-bedroom apartment, \$975 for a two-bedroom and \$1,100 for a three-bedroom.

The ground floor of the new structure would not have any residential units, rather it would contain a network of social support services, which will be operated by GEAR and include the following programs: parenting classes, respite care, counseling and support groups, a summer program for children, stress reduction and exercise classes, after-school tutoring and referral of medical and legal services.

In addition, the building would feature handrails in hallways and bathrooms, full handicapped accessibility, accessory off street parking for 18 motor vehicles, indoor recreational space, and a rear yard for recreational activities. It would also have intense security, including an intercom and emergency buzzer system in bathrooms and master bedrooms, an on-site superintendent and porter as well as surveillance cameras, and possibly a cyber doorman.

The estimated cost of the building is anticipated to be approximately \$15 million and construction is expected to begin some time in September or October 2010, according to Peter Florey, the principal of D & F Development, the construction company overseeing the project. The capital would come from various state public funding sources and equity raised through tax credits, Florey said. In order to qualify for the housing, an applicant must be a grandparent or older adult who is the legal and sole caregiver to a minor. Residents living within the confines of C.B. 12, which encompasses Jamaica, Hollis, St. Albans, Springfield Gardens, Baisley Park, Rochdale Village and South Jamaica, will be given preference.

In addition, a member of the community board will be chosen to serve on the committee that selects the occupants.

Area officials like the plan.

“We need to develop as much senior housing as possible,” said City Councilman Leroy Comrie (D-St. Albans). “There is a real rise in grandparents who are full-time parents. We need a space to meet the needs of both parties. Calvary Church has come up with a good contextual development plan that fits in well with the context of the community.”

“We need space for grandparents and their children and this is a church in our community that’s doing very good work,” said Adjoa Gzifa, chairwoman of C.B. 12. “In other communities, they have these facilities and so I don’t see why we shouldn’t have them as well. We are trying to benefit the people who are living in our community who are having a tough time.”

Once a grandchild becomes 21 years of age and moves out, the church would transplant the grandparents to the Claude Avenue facility, which is one block away, in order to free up space in the building.

Since the proposed facility is larger than the R3-2 zoning of the area permits — exceeding the maximum floor area, height and number of dwelling units, with too little open space — amongst other restrictions, the group petitioned C.B. 12 for a variance, which they approved at the Oct. 21 monthly meeting. Now it will go before the Board of Standards and Appeals for evaluation.

The church had proposed the idea two years ago and tried to accomplish its goal through a rezoning but since C.B. 12 feared that doing so would allow other contractors to build structures that would not be in line with the character of the neighborhood, the members instructed the church to apply for a variance instead.