

# Keep Homeless Shelter Out of Business District

By Jason Hughe

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While it's not a perfect world, I'd venture to say there are many agencies and resources in place today to help those people in our community who have no place to live as a result of a sudden financial calamity or mental illness. For the most part, these caregiver organizations are located properly, so as to be able to serve their homeless clientele without causing undue problems for the rest of the community.

That will change in a New York minute if the following hair-brained suggestion becomes reality: "Hey, let's open a permanent homeless shelter right smack in the middle of the downtown financial district."

Yep, you read it right.

For the past several months, the Centre City Development Corp., aka CCDC, has been working under a cloak of secrecy on a proposal that would allow the city-owned building at 1250 Sixth Ave., once known as the World Trade Center, to be converted into a complex that would treat and house up to 225 homeless people. Many, if not most, of these people are either mentally ill or addicted to drugs or alcohol. Included would be a medical clinic, mental health screening, drug and alcohol treatment, job counseling and living quarters for people who are down on their luck, to put it mildly.

## Bad for Business

Also down on their luck, however, would be the surrounding office buildings and other downtown properties. The marketability of these properties would plummet in ways that are hard to exaggerate.

Here are a couple of scenarios. The adjacent Union Bank building has 10 vacant floors now that the Procopio, Cory, Hargreaves & Savitch LLP law firm has moved to new digs. How do you think having a homeless shelter next door will affect efforts to lease up those floors?

Across the street is the Comerica Bank building on B Street, where the city operates a child care facility not more than 50 feet from the entrance to the proposed homeless shelter. Does anyone in their right mind want a couple hundred vagrants approaching or staring at these small children every day? Anybody read the papers or watched TV about local tragedies lately?

Then, there's Copley Symphony Hall, just a short walk away, where black-tie and evening-gowned patrons would be dodging the shopping carts and other contraptions being steered or carried about by these new financial district denizens.

Ironically, Bridgepoint Education recently signed a lease to take the bottom two floors of this building. Given the dearth of public knowledge about this proposal, you have to wonder if the company knew it might be sharing the building with "Homeless Central."

The building was literally donated to the city for a good reason. It's in sore need of major repairs and rehabilitation, requiring several thousands, if not millions, of dollars to get it into shape and keep it that way.

## More-Appropriate Locations

Rather than pursue this absurd idea, the city should sell the building for whatever it can get and use the proceeds to help pay for a homeless shelter elsewhere, where such services are more appropriately located.

A couple of possibilities come to mind. The first one is Golden Hall, where our city's leaders could experience firsthand homeless people standing, sitting and lying down right outside City Hall next door. At least Golden Hall doesn't require the amount of rehabilitation and retrofitting needed for the Sixth Avenue structure, and it wouldn't adversely affect the downtown office buildings the way the proposed building does.

More practical, perhaps, is to find a venue near Father Joe's complex in East Village, where most of his clientele already congregates.

In a letter last month to the San Diego City Council's Land Use and Housing Committee, BOMA San Diego, an organization serving the local office building industry, expressed its strong concern about entering into negotiations with PATH/Affirmed Housing to convert the proposed building into a homeless center. The letter referenced the lack of a public and transparent process. Where have we heard that before?

Considering how difficult it is these days to pull a simple building permit for a routine home improvement, it's breathtaking to learn how PATH has been able to work with the San Diego Housing Committee and CCDC to make this idea nearly fait accompli without so much as a word whispered in the downtown business community. This structure has major seismic, fire and other life safety issues, yet the City Council is now talking — quietly, of course — about donating the whole building and parking structure to PATH for the homeless.

If I was stupid enough to hatch this idea, I'd keep it under wraps, too.

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