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S.M.A.R.T. Transitional Housing Project Moves Forward

Coastal Commission Finds No Substance in Opposition to Treatment Program

San Diego City Attorney Mara W. Elliott announced today that a transitional housing program that helps low-level drug offenders secure treatment in a safe and supportive environment will move forward with the consent of the California Coastal Commission.

The Coastal Commission on Wednesday upheld the City's coastal development permit for the Smart on Palm facility, finding that the appeal filed by Citizens for South Bay Coastal Access through its attorney, Cory Briggs, lacked merit. The Commission's unanimous vote followed its staff's determination that Briggs' claim – that the facility violated the Local Coastal Plan – “raises no substantial issue,” rendering the City Council's approval of the coastal permit “final and effective.”

The City Attorney's S.M.A.R.T. (San Diego Misdemeanants At-Risk Track) Program provides housing, treatment, education, and counseling for low-level drug offenders who would otherwise be caught in a recurring cycle of jail, substance abuse, and homelessness. The facility on Palm Avenue in Egger Highlands will provide beds for 81 people, many of whom are now living on sidewalks and in canyons.

“This program provides a lifeline to constituents who want to overcome addiction and return to society in a productive and meaningful way,” Elliott said. “Mr. Briggs' legal maneuvers have succeeded only in delaying assistance for people who desperately need access to treatment and counseling, a path to sobriety, and a safe place to sleep at night.”

The Smart on Palm facility was previously a run-down Super 8 motel that was the site of frequent drug use and prostitution activities, and the subject of numerous calls for police and emergency services.

Briggs' appeal claimed that converting the motel to a transitional housing project would cause an impermissible loss of low-cost lodging for visitors to the coast. Coastal Commission staff disagreed, reporting that the facility was “underutilized,” “underperforming,” and, despite its low cost, frequently rated “poor” or “terrible” in online reviews.

Where Briggs claimed the motel accounted for 25 percent of low-cost visitor accommodations in the area, Coastal Commission staff said the true figure was less than 6.2 percent.

“It is also important to note,” Coastal Commission staff said, “that the project will provide housing opportunities to a population that typically would not otherwise be able to afford coastal housing, thereby increasing coastal access for this population.” The facility is about 2.8 miles from the Imperial Beach pier.

“The conversion of the Super 8 to transitional housing presents a rare occurrence for both the limited circumstances where transitional housing is proposed within the Coastal Zone as well as where an underutilized hotel in disrepair can be repurposed without significant loss to the larger nearby hotel stock,” the staff report said.

The S.M.A.R.T. Program addresses an ongoing challenge of the criminal justice system: low-level misdemeanor offenders who cycle through the system without access to services, coordination of care, or meaningful incentives to engage with social service providers. Many are arrested, taken into custody, and released, only to be arrested again before the original charge comes to trial.

The program safely diverts chronic misdemeanor offenders, particularly those who are otherwise resistant to intervention, to a case manager and offers individualized treatment and community-based supportive housing.

Once completed, Smart on Palm will offer accommodations for men and women, communal kitchens, exercise facilities and even the opportunity to grow vegetables in a patio garden. The overall goal is to improve quality of life for both the participants and the community.

A broad and diverse coalition of concerned organizations developed the S.M.A.R.T. Program concept to effectively and compassionately address a complex criminal justice issue. The San Diego County Office of the Public Defender, San Diego Police Department, San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, and Family Health Centers of San Diego all collaborated with the City Attorney’s Office on this project. The Office of Mayor Kevin Faulconer also provided support and assistance. The City of San Diego and the County of San Diego secured State funding to pioneer this innovative program.

The City Attorney’s Office is developing a timeline to open Smart on Palm in 2020.

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