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Silver Lake gets a new neighbor with former inmate housing By MEG FRASER

In spring of 2011, residents of the Silver Lake area of Providence will have a new neighbor on Plainfield Street. Housed in an abandoned ice cream factory, the OpenDoors facility will serve as supportive housing for the formerly incarcerated.

Whether OpenDoors will be a good neighbor sparks a difference of opinion. “I’m not against re-entry programs, but I think this is something you approach very carefully,” said victim advocate and Cranston resident Carolyn Medeiros. “This is the wrong location and the wrong time.”

On Oct. 19, Medeiros will take part in a community meeting to discuss the facility. It will take place at 6:30 p.m. at La Hacienda Restaurant.

Just one mile from the Cranston border and also close to Johnston, the facility is close to a school, a community center and a liquor store, all of which, Medeiros points out, could be triggers for an offender.

“You want the least amount of triggers. It’s a landmine there,” she said. “You can’t walk 10 feet without stepping on a child.”

Medeiros, who worked in juvenile re-entry at one time, met with OpenDoors Executive Director Sol Rodriguez when she learned of the project and grilled the advocacy organization’s leader on the types of criminals that would be housed in an already vulnerable neighborhood.

OpenDoors, which supports and advocates for former offenders, will offer 19 units of supportive housing as well resources like job readiness programs, case management and counseling and financial literacy classes. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups will meet on site. Those classes and resources will also be available to the public.

The project will cost a total of \$4.3 million, of which \$1.8 million comes from federal stimulus funds. The building will be energy efficient, using all green technologies.

Once she and her staff are settled, Rodriguez hopes to offer support to the surrounding community. For example, when some residents said they wanted more streetlights, she suggested that could be something OpenDoors could help with.

“Those are things we’d like to get involved in. We want to be good neighbors,” she said. Level II and III sex offenders will not be eligible to move in, but Medeiros still fears the impact of having Level I offenders - those who are not required to register - in an environment with situational triggers close by.

Rodriguez counters that the organization is doing everything to make the facility a safe one.

There will be a 24-hour security guard on site, gates around the property and keypad entry for residents. She also said surveillance would be used.

But Medeiros’ biggest complaint is that the project has been pushed through without regard for residents. Silver Lake is a low-income area where many neighbors do not have the resources, time or courage to stand up to the powers that be.

“Why are their rights so less valued than someone who lives in a nicer neighborhood?” Medeiros asks. “This wasn’t put in Portsmouth or Barrington. This neighborhood isn’t going to fight.”

Rodriguez agreed on the count that not much opposition has been mounted. She believes some of that could have been because of the length of time the project has spanned. The idea first came out of a conference attended by Governor Donald Carcieri more than five years ago. OpenDoors bought the building years ago, and has been working on securing funding ever since. Zoning board meetings, which would have been publicly posted, happened early on in the process.

Medeiros is currently collecting signatures for a petition against the project. She has more than 160 signatures so far.

She believes a contained location, such as one on the Eleanor Slater Hospital campus, would have been more appropriate.

Rodriguez argues that offenders are already moving into the area, so providing support in their home base is the best place to start. The ACI tracks the location of outgoing inmates, and Rodriguez says Providence is the top city for former offenders, and in particular, areas like Silver Lake, Mount Hope and Olneyville.

Those offenders have the right to move wherever they chose, so she doesn’t see the problem.

“We were looking for a location in Providence because the majority of the people coming home from the ACI are coming back to Providence. People are moving back to that neighborhood anyway,” she said.

Rodriguez added that the facility is not a halfway house, and is meant for individuals who have already been living in the community for a year or so.

Ken Rivard, the grievance committee chairman for the Rhode Island Brotherhood of Correctional Officers, has his own concerns about the facility.

“We’re a little concerned about this program because it’s a post-reentry program and we’re afraid that down the road it’s going to turn into a pre-release program, which we are totally against,” he said. “The recidivism rate in the state is around 60 percent so whether you have 18 people or 100 people there, it’s definitely a concern.”

Rivard said that the Brotherhood was left out of the discussion, though he shared Medeiros’ concerns over the possible triggers in the area. Now that ground has been broken, though, he doesn’t believe much can be done.

“When inmates get out of prison we have no jurisdiction. Once it’s up and running, it’s tough for people to fight it,” he said.

Some opponents question whether concentrating a group of inmates into the area will lead to increased law enforcement costs, not only for Providence, but for Cranston and Johnston who are within a short distance.

For now, Cranston Chief of Police Col. Marco Palombo isn’t jumping to any conclusions. “She assured us there would be no sex offenders or violent offenders being housed there and we were relieved to hear that,” he said. “We will monitor it closely and work closely with the Department of Corrections and the Providence Police Department.”

He doesn’t anticipate costs trickling down, but said the department would monitor that just the same.

“We just want to be informed and ahead of the curve,” he said.

As the opening date for OpenDoors nears, it remains to be seen whether Medeiros’ grassroots efforts, along with fellow opponents like Congressional candidate Mark Zaccaria, will make a difference.

Despite Rodriguez’s promises to the contrary, Medeiros is convinced that the program will have a negative impact on the Silver Lake community and the surrounding areas.

“If we can’t deal with what we’ve got here, why are we going to invite a whole new bag of tricks?” she asked. “We all know there are needs for these programs but this is not the time.”