

Johnson County wants to build a homeless shelter in Lenexa. The plan hit another big setback

Johnson County Post | By [Roxie Hammill](#)

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Mayor and Council –

I'm serving on a presentation panel with the Administrator of Johnson County. During a prep call for the presentation, she let me know about this matter. I thought it would be a good heads-up prior to our travels.

- Victor

Andrew Gaug / Johnson County Post

Hundreds of people attended the Lenexa Planning Commission meeting at Lenexa City Hall on Monday night, Aug. 26, 2024.

While Lenexa planning commissioners agreed that more homeless support is needed in Johnson County, they faulted the project at the former La Quinta Inn for being a bad fit for the surrounding neighborhood. But the Lenexa City Council will get the final say.

A proposal to [convert a Lenexa hotel into a countywide homeless shelter](#) got a unanimous thumbs down from the Lenexa Planning Commission Monday after an hours-long meeting that stretched past midnight.

While commissioners agreed that more homeless support is needed in Johnson County, they faulted the project at the La Quinta Inn and Suites near 95th Street and Interstate 35 for being a bad fit for the surrounding neighborhood.

"I just think this is not something that would be good for that neighborhood," said Commissioner Curt Katterhenry, adding that the site is at one of the main entrances to the city. "This would be the front door to our city, essentially. Is this what we want as the front door of our city?"

Commission Chair Chris Poss said that the planning commission's job is to evaluate

"We call balls and strikes," he said. "It either fits within the criteria that we have, or it doesn't fit."

The vote followed [the recommendation of planning staff to deny a special use permit](#) that would be needed for the center to operate.

The commission's vote does not automatically kill the shelter.

The Lenexa City Council will have the final say. After the meeting, a city statement said the council is tentatively set to take up the issue at its meeting Sept. 17.



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difficult because it will require a supermajority vote of six councilmembers to go against the planning commission decision if they want to approve it.

Staff predicts strain on police and neighborhood



Juliana Garcia / Johnson County Post

La Quinta Inn & Suites in Lenexa in August 2024. Johnson County wants to use the space to build a countywide homeless shelter.

As proposed, the shelter would provide 50 units for single adults who are unhoused on a referral basis for stays that would range from 30 to 90 days.

Another 25 units are proposed for transitional, potentially longer-term housing needs of up to 24 months, for which the clients would pay rent based on income.

A variety of services, including case management, mental health and job support services, are also to be provided on site.

Lenexa planners last week explained several reasons for their recommendation to deny the permit:

- The new shelter plus [the already existing Project 1020](#), which operates during the winter months out of the Shawnee Mission Unitarian Universalist Church a few blocks away from the La Quinta hotel, could concentrate negative impacts on that area and cause it to become a "homeless services hub" for the entire county, according to staff's report.

- A police department assessment concluded that the new shelter would strain its resources, requiring additional employees and more cost to the city. The report said the shelter is likely to attract loitering, panhandling and unsanitary conditions that, while not criminal, could contribute to blight and prompt calls for service. The report said that the center could attract unscheduled drop-offs, even though it is slated to take clients by referral only, leaving those dropped off with few options but to linger in the neighborhood.
- Several elements of the shelter's plan, particularly the financing, remained in flux because of the abbreviated timeline, staff said.
- The use as a shelter would be inconsistent with a key redevelopment area along Quivira Road. The site is within a tax increment financing district set up to combat blight and has already attracted new businesses, the report said.

Supporters: 'We can do this correctly'



Andrew Gaug / Johnson County Post

Audience members at Lenexa planning commission meeting raise heart-shaped signs to show their support for the homeless shelter on Monday, Aug. 26, 2024.

All of these issues were discussed at Monday's meeting, which was attended by about 400 people, with the council chambers itself packed and other attendees directed to an overflow room to watch by video feed.

Fifty-seven people gave public comments at the hearing.

Slightly over half who spoke Monday were in favor of the project, saying it addresses a critically unmet need for housing that would be backed up by services to help people get back on their feet and into the workforce and stable housing.

Several disputed the staff's reasoning against the site. Some pointed out that the hotel is a form of temporary housing.

Kay Heley of Overland Park said the services center does meet the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood and "repurposes a failing hotel in a known hot spot for violent crime and drug arrest with a stable, gated, continuously staffed center for its residents."

Joseph Hinkle Thompson of Lenexa said, “We have a chance to use our resources to create a model that we can show to Johnson County — to Kansas, to our nation — how we can do this correctly.”

Jennifer Winfrey of Overland Park related her own story of being living behind a dumpster for a time in Merriam and being cared for by “the kindness of strangers.”

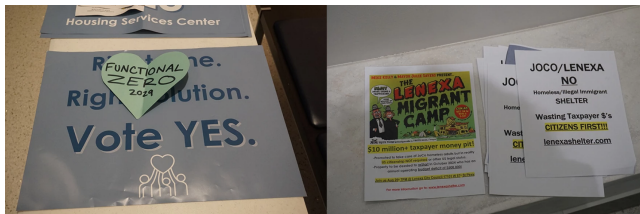
Other supporters urged the commission not to make a decision based on fear of homeless people. “We’re all one medical crisis away from financial ruin,” said the Rev. Rose Schwab, pastor of the Lenexa church where Project 1020 is located.

Opponents: A 'Trojan horse' and 'chaos'

But some speakers opposed to the project said they were afraid of the potential for crime and “chaos” that a homeless shelter could introduce, especially if people are dropped off without a referral to live there.

Marcus Maloney of Lenexa and others said the center could end up serving people from outside the county, including undocumented immigrants.

“With this shelter I will no longer be comfortable with my wife walking or jogging our own block,” he said, adding that he has not seen homelessness near his neighborhood. “They are trying to bring a problem to us that doesn’t currently exist.”



Andrew Gaug / Johnson County Post

Two different set of signs for and against the proposed homeless shelter in Lenexa.

Robert Glen Davis noted the center would have individual rooms rather than a gymnasium with cots: “If you reward something you get more of it,” he said of homelessness.

Phil Bauer of Leawood said the county wants to make Lenexa into a “sanctuary city.”

Tim McCabe referenced the staff note about the proximity of schools and parks to Project 1020 and the proposed homeless services center.

“We need to defend our community,” he said. “This thing is a Trojan horse and it’s headed right toward us, and that’s exactly what the county wants.”

Other speakers countered what they said was propaganda expressed in cartoons on postcards and [an anonymous website](#) that has sprung up opposing the shelter.

Renee Loya, of Lenexa said the faith community’s message of love is a stark contrast to the “dark rhetoric” of cartoons depicting homeless people as shadowy criminals with

By comparison the planning commission members' discussion was relatively short, with each member in turn agreeing that the site was not appropriate for the area.

Rising rates of homelessness in Johnson County

The planning commission's denial recommendation Monday is the latest step in a journey that officially began last December at the Johnson County commission.

Buying the 2.6-acre hotel property, which also includes a vacant former Denny's Restaurant, was proposed as a way to address a need in the county for a growing population of people without consistent places to stay — a need that the county has been studying since [a comprehensive housing study](#) was done in 2021.

In the latest United Community Services [point-in-time snapshot](#), some 250 people were without homes on the survey night, a 6% increase from January 2023 and a 44% spike from January 2015.

The Lenexa site was seen as ideally situated in a commercial area near major highways with public transportation options.



Andrew Gaug / Johnson County Post

The crowded overflow area for attendees at Lenexa City Hall for attendees of a planning commission meeting on Aug. 26, 2024.

Commissioners who supported it, including Chairman Mike Kelly, said the individual rooms were well suited to provide private space and services to help those people get back into jobs or more permanent shelter.

Using existing space would also be less expensive than building a shelter from the ground up, they noted.

Since the county already has some shelter for people fleeing domestic violence or recently involved in the justice system, the proposed Lenexa shelter would only be available to single adults who do not fall into those two categories. Children also would not be at the shelter.

Cities have been asked to kick in funds for shelter

Last December, the county commission entered into a contract to buy the property for \$6 million, and budgeted \$500,000 for due diligence, with a closing slated for October.

Renovations added to the price tag, bringing the total to \$10.5 million. All of that money is coming from federal COVID-19 relief funds.

City	Proposed Annual Contribution	Status
Overland Park	\$150,342.59	Considering at 9/4 committee, 9/9 council
Olathe	\$112,485.57	Presentation on 8/6, will consider at future meeting
Shawnee	\$52,952.38	Unknown
Leawood	\$25,920.48	Unanimous approval on 8/5
Gardner	\$19,358.74	Declined
Prairie Village	\$17,468.48	Presentation 8/5, will consider at future meeting
Merriam	\$8,295.62	Unanimous approval on 8/13
Mission	\$7,638.84	Approved 8/21
Roeland Park	\$5,120.02	Approved 8/20
De Soto	\$4,988.05	Included in budget, approved
Spring Hill	\$4,569.27	Approved for one year
Fairway	\$3,171.79	5-1 approval on 8/12
Mission Hills	\$2,688.93	Unanimous approval on 8/13
Westwood	\$1,312.81	Included in budget
Edgerton	\$1,310.52	Declined
Lake Quivira	\$731.54	Presentation upcoming
Westwood Hills	\$301.31	Approved
Mission Woods	\$150.27	Approved

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Chart for where cities in Johnson County stand on funding the shelter.

Housing is proposed for the hotel itself, and the former Denny’s is under consideration for storage or future office space for the services center.

ReStart Inc., a Kansas City, Missouri based nonprofit whose mission is to end homelessness, was chosen as the operator of the shelter. Under an agreement approved by the commission, it would also eventually take ownership of the property.

The non-profit plans to use private donations and grants to meet expenses, but has also asked the cities and townships of Johnson County to contribute 76 cents per capita towards the shelter’s operating costs.

The county says, so far, 10 cities, including Leawood, Fairway, Mission and Merriam, have approved their share of funding, with a handful of others set to consider the matter in the coming weeks.

Some of the largest cities in the county – with the largest per-capita requests for funding – have not yet voted on the matter.

County officials plan to use federal coronavirus relief funds for much of their expenses. But the use of that money has also put deadline pressure on the project.

Per federal rules, the COVID relief funds left to the county must be obligated by December 31 of this year and spent by the end of 2026.

With earnest money payments ongoing and potential closing in October, some city leaders have been critical of the loose ends of the proposal and the speed with which it has been put together and presented.

Supporters have also been dealing with opposition that has at times included misinformation

Critics have depicted the shelter as a haven for crime, drugs and sex trafficking that could spill into neighborhoods and businesses. There also have been unfounded fears of busloads or planeloads of homeless people being dropped off from other parts of the city and from the U.S. Southern border.

ReStart and county supporters have repeatedly said the referral system will prioritize keeping people close to their home base to make sure the center serves people who have more of a connection to Johnson County.

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