Design for $100 million St. Paul homeless shelter to be unveiled

By Maja Beckstrom
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An architectural rendering of the planned Catholic Charities shelter and housing complex that will break ground this summer in downtown St. Paul. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities and Cermak Rhoades Architects)

The plan for a new downtown St. Paul homeless shelter now has a design and heavy private backers.

At a community breakfast Friday, Catholic Charities will reveal architectural drawings for a five-story Dorothy Day Center, the first phase of an ambitious two-building campus that will not only shelter the city's homeless, but also move them into housing.

Officials also will announce a goal of raising $40 million from private donors for the $100 million project, modeled on Catholic Charities' successful Minneapolis shelter Higher Ground, which opened in 2012.

So far, the state, Ramsey County, St. Paul and other public agencies have committed $28 million.

"What we're going to do is going to be dramatically better and different than what occurs at Dorothy Day Center now," said Catholic Charities executive director Tim Marx. "That image of a dilapidated facility, people milling around and not being treated with dignity is going away. We're going to have a dignified shelter, connections to services and a really well-designed space that fits into the shadow of the Capitol and the Cathedral of St. Paul."

Few people, however, are as excited about the summer groundbreaking as Alen Kiefer.

The 54-year-old has been sleeping at Dorothy Day for the last few weeks. He helps out, so he gets first
Kiefer welcomed news that the new building will have bunk beds.

The first Dorothy Day Center opened in 1981 as a drop-in center. As the number of homeless people grew, it evolved into the largest year-round shelter for single adults in St. Paul. But it was never designed for the 200 or more people who sleep there nightly on mats and the annual 6,000 people who come through for services.

A tipping point came in 2011 when the shelter turned people away for the first time.

Mayor Coleman convened a task force headed by business and philanthropic leaders to find a long-term solution. After neighbors opposed a proposal for a new shelter on the edge of the East Side, Catholic Charities decided to expand at its current site.

Original estimates put the cost at $63 million, but the price tag went up largely due to a rise in construction costs and an additional floor of apartments, Marx said, as well as higher costs relating to the downtown site.

"This is a typical project in terms of the mix of funding sources," Marx said. "What is unique is the amount of private support we're bringing to the table."

Catholic Charities will announce Friday that donors have already contributed more than $11 million toward the $40 million private financing goal. Gifts include $5 million from the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation, created by the founder of Best Buy; $1 million each from the Frey Foundation and the Pohlad Foundation; and a combined total of $1.1 million from the St. Paul Foundation, F.R. Bigelow Foundation and the Mardag Foundation.

"This community is quite charitable, and I think it will rally around this issue," said Ecolab CEO Doug Baker, who is co-chairing the campaign, along with HealthPartners CEO Mary Brainerd and Andy Cecere, chief operating officer of U.S. Bank. "I don't think leaving people under the bridge is what our society should be about. We have the capacity to do better."

Catholic Charities also hopes for $60 million in public funding. The Legislature approved $6 million in state bonds last year. The Minnesota Housing Finance Agency so far has approved $19 million. Ramsey County is in for $1.7 million. The city of St. Paul is working "toward a goal of $1 million," Marx said.

Gov. Mark Dayton asked for another $12 million this year, though the Legislature likely won't consider bonding requests until next session.

"I think there is a great chance between this year and next year that we're going to get a significant investment from the state of Minnesota," Marx said. "Obviously, we'd be absolutely thrilled to secure those funds this year."

Construction will start this summer across the street from the current shelter after the Labor & Professional Center at 411 Main St. is torn down.

The five-story, L-shaped shelter will have a courtyard facing Main Street where people can wait on benches under shade trees and a rain canopy. Bunk beds will accommodate 278 men and women, about the same number currently sheltered. For $7 a day, clients will be able to reserve slightly nicer bunks with storage, and get their money returned for a security deposit when they move out. The bunks will be an upgrade of ones in Minneapolis made by a local fabricator out of folded sheet metal.

"We were drooling when we saw the prototype," said Matt Finn, project architect with St. Paul-based
Cermak Rhoades Architects, which also designed Minneapolis Higher Ground.

"The Minneapolis shelter is as good as we possibly could have made it at the time," he added. "But Catholic Charities is asking us to be better, and we’re making every effort to provide an even better building for St. Paul."

A separate entrance will lead to 193 permanent housing units on the three top floors. Most will be single rooms with a microwave, sink and refrigerator with shared lounges and kitchens.

Phase 2 of the project involves tearing down the existing Dorothy Day Center and building an "opportunity center," which will house county workers, a clinic, veterans services and likely employment training, GED classes and even a barber chair. It will be topped by 166 housing units. Catholic Charities plans to close the existing 155 housing units in the 100-year-old Mary Hall next door and sell the building, Marx said, leaving Catholic Charities with a total of 359 housing units downtown, about double current numbers.

As groundbreaking approaches, news is trickling down to those who use Dorothy Day. Kiefer was intrigued to learn of rooms on the new shelter's upper floors available at a rent he could afford on his disability check.

Over the years, Kiefer has floated in and out of jobs, struggled with drugs and "couch hopped" among relatives.

"I just want a place of my own where I don't have to worry about the next five or six years," he said.