



Youth Advocates of Sitka

Empowering the youth of Alaska

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December 23, 2022

City of Sitka
Planning Commission

Dear Members of the Planning Commission:

We are writing this letter to provide further details of our intentions to purchase 1931 Dodge Circle and our request for a Conditional Use Permit for a quasi-institutional home for both sides of the duplex. Youth Advocates of Sitka has received \$2 million congressional appropriations through Senator Murkowski for a statewide demonstration project to provide services to vulnerable youth experiencing human trafficking and exploitation. The pilot program, Coastal Haven will be established in Sitka and provide 24-7 residential mental health treatment, clinical services, life skills training, and employment services for youth ages 16 to 24 who are victims of human trafficking, or who are at risk of human trafficking. Coastal Haven will function as an aftercare program to ensure trauma-informed aftercare services are provided to young victims of human trafficking and exploitation, and provide opportunities and resources, and building resiliency needed for them to integrate into society successfully and completely, as a functioning independent adult. There will be maintained staff to client ratio of 1 to 6. All clients will be drug and alcohol free as a requirement for admission this program.

YAS began looking at the available properties that would suit the needs of the Coastal Haven program in Sitka in May 2022. In early June, YAS identified 1931 Dodge Circle as the perfect place for the program. This property is a duplex, which allows YAS to have a male side and a female side, plus office space for staff and large garages for wilderness therapy gear storage. Additionally, as the name Coastal Haven implies, the duplex sits up in a beautiful stand of cedar trees with an ocean view, offers privacy from the main road, is located out of the downtown core, and provides the safety and solitude required. The duplex offers the retreat-like setting YAS was hoping for so clients can disengage from their previous environment and be fully immersed in nature, while also having full support of behavioral health staff. A retreat-like setting plays an important role in the implementation of the wilderness therapy experience component of the overall programming. The vision is to remove victimized youth from the larger cities in Alaska and bring them to the remote safety of Coastal Haven in Sitka.

In August, YAS engaged a realtor (who is also a YAS Board Member) with communicating to the sellers that they were interested in purchasing the property, but had a very specific timeline due to the release of the obligated congressional appropriations. Since August, YAS and the sellers have been negotiating the purchase of the duplex. In November, YAS received the obligated congressional appropriations and have moved forward with completing a home inspection, putting down \$5,000 in earnest money, signing a purchase agreement. The current closing date for the property is tentatively scheduled for after January 6, 2023.



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On December 16, 2022 YAS was informed by their realtor that the City of Sitka's Planning Commission inquired about the intention, purpose, and proposed plans for the duplex. YAS was informed that the Planning Department received a complaint, or a request to investigate, from a concerned neighbor in the vicinity, while the realtor did not realize the zoning might be an issue. Since then, YAS has heard that some residents have been stating that YAS intends to "tear down the duplex and build a 15-bed institution." Of course, this is not even close to what the congressionally directed pilot project is. Thus, YAS is providing a detailed outline of the plan for the duplex and the Coastal Haven program, to clarify for the concerned residents and the Planning Commission:

- Purchase 1931 Dodge Circle
- Based on the Home Inspection (Dan Evans 11/7/2022) address all deficiencies, safety issues, and significant findings (Inspection Report is provided). Includes, but not limited to the following:
 - Install exterior handrails on stairways
 - Shore up support posts on 1 patio
 - Fix fence
 - Clean roof and gutters
 - Fix fire door between garage and house
 - Replace all smoke detectors and CO2 alarms
 - Replace sliding patio door
 - Fix minor plumbing issues
 - Replace non-working electrical outlets
 - Replace floor in bathroom and mount toilet to floor
 - Install vents to boiler room for ventilation
- Obtain DHSS licensing for residential treatment facility
- Hire program staff (this will create up to 14 local livable-waged jobs)
- Develop programming, policies, procedures, referral network, etc.
- Install cameras and security equipment
- Conduct statewide advertising and outreach to educate the public on the program availability, and to identify victims of human trafficking among homeless or displaced youth to recruit in to the program.
- Accept youth into the program (Target July 2023)

The Coastal Haven program will be able to provide residential treatment services and wrap-around services for up to 12 youth ages 16 to 24. YAS expects the program to roll out slowly and start with a small number of youth (1-2) and then eventually grow to the full 12 youth capacity. YAS plans on having 1-2 youth per bedroom. The youth will be required to attend high school, college, or be employed while in the program. The residence will likely be mostly empty during the day, except for 2-4 staff. When youth arrive back to the residence from school or work, they are engaged with staff in meal preparation, skills training, clinical group therapy, homework, and chores.

The youth are also not allowed to have vehicle while in the program. This will prevent excess vehicle traffic in the neighborhood and on the easement. Only staff will have vehicles, probably 2-4 during the day. There is plenty of room for YAS staff to park up to 6 vehicles in front of the duplex. Plus, the duplex



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has 2 garages and a car port that will accommodate 3 vehicles. Youth are also not allowed to have visitors at the residence. This will also prevent excess vehicle traffic in the neighborhood. Additionally, as the name Coastal Haven implies, this residential treatment facility will remain a quiet and safe place for the youth. Youth will not be allowed to make loud noises or play loud music. Youth will also not be engaged in any outside activities on the property. All activities and events will occur offsite from the duplex, such as camp fires, picnics, and games. Offsite, youth will be provided both therapeutic interventions combined with outdoor holistic and expeditionary activities such as sea kayaking, hiking, and camping activities as part of their overall wellness, healing journey, and restoration of their lives. Essentially the outside of the duplex will appear to be a quiet, clean, and well-maintained house. To maintain the safety and privacy for the youth residents, there will be no signage on the exterior of the duplex, only the required licensing signs will be posted inside of the duplex. The facility will have some security measures such as door alarms, and have cameras installed to protect the youth clients as well as the neighbors. YAS works very closely with the Sitka Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and has a great relationship with both law enforcement agencies.

YAS has operated residential treatment facilities for youth in Sitka since 1975. All their other facilities are compliant, licensed, and operate seamlessly. YAS does not receive complaints from neighbors who live around their other residential facilities. If there were to be a complaint, YAS would work with the neighbors to resolve and remedy whatever the issues are. YAS is committed to having integrated residential facilities for Alaska's youth, not segregated, or further marginalized from the rest of the community, as the community is who raises a child. YAS hopes the Planning Commission sees the value of permitting a Conditional Use Permit for a quasi-institutional home at 1931 Dodge Circle, otherwise YAS will need to place this congressionally directed project on hold until another satisfactory property is available for purchase.

We thank you for your time reviewing our request for a Conditional Use Permit for a quasi-institutional home. If you have further questions, please feel free to contact me at the following email: heather.meuret@sitkayouth.org, or at 907-747-2853.

Sincerely,

Heather Meuret

Executive Director

Youth Advocates of Sitka