

Los Angeles Times

December 11, 2017

Weingart Center plans first high-rise homeless housing for L.A.'s skid row



Weingart Center Chief Operating Officer Tonja Boykin, left, and Chief Executive Kevin Murray show a rendering of an 18-story residential tower planned next to the agency's skid row shelter. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Doug Smith

For decades, the Weingart Center has been a fixture on Los Angeles' skid row, one among the many places of refuge where homeless men and women come for shelter, food and support.

Now the social services agency is expanding its mission into permanent housing and plans to do it with a flourish by reshaping the skyline of L.A.'s most depressed neighborhood.

Weingart has filed applications with the city to build three high-rise residences on the two blocks it shares with the homeless services providers Lamp Community, Union Rescue Mission, Volunteers of America and the Midnight Mission.

Weingart filed the plans for all three buildings early this year to have them on record before the vote on Measure S, the city initiative that would have imposed new restrictions on building apartment towers, shops and offices in Los Angeles.

After the measure's failure in March, the agency is now pressing ahead first with an 18-story tower next to Weingart's existing facility at San Pedro and 6th streets. It could be completed as early as 2021, President and Chief Executive Kevin Murray said. Plans for the other two buildings are still in flux.

Murray said the sleek metal-and-glass design by Joseph Wong Design Associates of San Diego would "improve the neighborhood through architecture."

"One of the things we asked the architect is we don't want it to look like a housing project," said Murray, a former state senator. "We want it to look like one of these other first-class downtown apartments."

The \$138-million project would provide 278 new units of affordable housing, most of them for the chronically homeless, and would dominate the block. Weingart's existing facility, in the 11-story former El Rey Hotel, is already more than twice as tall as any other building around it.

The project's large scale would achieve the highest and best use of what is currently a surface parking lot, but it also is intended to make a statement, Murray said.

Like other homeless advocates, Murray is concerned that the city's goal of producing 1,000 new units of housing for the chronically homeless each year will be difficult to reach even with the additional funds from a \$1.2-billion bond voters approved last year.

Typically, projects that tap government funds to build homeless housing have fewer than 100 units each — and often only 49, the maximum allowed without costly design and environmental reviews. Projects can also be slowed or forced to scale down by local opposition.

“If you’re trying to build 1,000 units a year, it’s much harder to build them 30 and 40 and 50 at a clip,” Murray said.

Weingart, whose developer Chelsea is currently preparing its environmental impact report, has been showing renderings of the project to downtown groups. It has met some opposition over both the scale and its goal of permanently housing homeless people on skid row.

“When will skid row stop being the default answer for the region’s inability to adequately provide adequate housing for persons who need it?” asked Estela Lopez, executive director of the Central City East Assn.

The association has not yet taken a position on the project, but Lopez said she is hearing concerns from members over the concentration of homeless housing.

About 1 in 3 of the city’s permanent supportive housing units is in downtown, most in the small area bounded by Main, Alameda, 4th and 7th streets, a Times analysis of Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority housing data shows.

About 2,600 formerly homeless people live in those units.

“It is the most difficult environment for anyone who is fighting mental illness or addiction to restore normalcy,” Lopez said.

The concentration of homeless people also hurts downtown businesses, Lopez said.

“Their insurance costs are going up, their security costs are going up,” Lopez said. “It’s attributed to a cause they cannot abate.”

Murray contends the Weingart's high-rise will help to change that by enhancing the security, including 24-hour video surveillance, that he said keeps the sidewalks around the Weingart Center relatively free of overnight camping.

"You don't have to be overwhelming," Murray said. "I think if you create an environment where they know there's going to be somebody patrolling, they know there's going to be somebody to contact them, they know they're on camera, you're probably not going to pitch your tent there."

Councilman Jose Huizar, who represents downtown, has given preliminary support.

Huizar voted for the transfer of a parcel of city land that was needed to move the project forward, spokesman Rick Coca said.

"We'll wait until they are further along in the process to weigh in on any specific design elements, but we support it," Coca said.

The prospect of denser housing on skid row is also fine with Mike Alvidrez, the head of SRO Housing Trust, owner of more than 30 permanent supportive housing buildings downtown.

Alvidrez once planned to partner with Weingart on the tower project. He backed out for undisclosed reasons but still has no disagreement with adding more homeless housing.

"When we think what downtown might look like in 20 years, it's going to be a much denser place," Alvidrez said. "With that density, you could easily think of how to add more supportive housing that blends in."

"There needs to be housing where there are homeless folks," Alvidrez said.