

# THE TRIBUNE

December 13, 2011

## **Mental health group hopes old San Luis Obispo building would fill new role**

By Bob Cuddy

Eighty years after it was built as an orphanage and nearly 40 years after it was shuttered, the old Sunny Acres building on Bishop Street above Johnson Avenue in San Luis Obispo could once again open its doors to members of society who need help.

The Transitions Mental Health Association is angling to buy the property and convert it to independent living studios for people with mental illnesses. Jill Bolster-White, Transitions' executive director, met in closed session with the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday to make the organization's case.

The county took no action.

Supervisors have been considering selling the property to private owners. Transitions could sidetrack that line of thought.

John Ashbaugh, a San Luis Obispo city councilman and a former Transitions board member is still interested in the property's future, and said the organization has been conducting a feasibility study to determine whether it could put the property to good use.

Ashbaugh said the structure "has been sadly neglected," but Transitions believes it can be renovated.

He said the organization needs time to look at "the general contours of the costs involved," and come up with a plan to raise money. He said some contractors have said they would do some work gratis.

Bolster-White said the group will look at all manner of possibilities to pay for a takeover, including a combination of government and private sector loans. A long-term lease is also an option, she said.

The building has an interesting history, Ashbaugh said. It was founded as an orphanage in 1931 and closed its doors in 1974. It has sat unused but has attracted vandals. On Halloween night, police "had to put extra security up there," he said.

There is liability connected with such a structure, he said, and the county would like to get out from under legal responsibility for things that happen there.

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“The building is just crying out for someone to take care of it,” Ashbaugh said. He questions whether “a private residence would be consistent with the character and history” of the structure.

“I really am hopeful about the prospects for this building fulfilling its original purpose — helping this community by sheltering and serving the needs of people with special needs,” Ashbaugh said.