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Preacher eyes Laurelton for cons, homeless

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Justin Engle/The Daily Item The former Laurelton Center in Hartley Township, Union County.

The Daily Item



LAURELTON — Hartley Township officials are wary about a Jefferson County evangelical minister's interest in creating a homeless shelter at the former Laurelton Center that would house, among others, parolees finishing sentences for sex-, violence- and drug-

related crimes.

The Just for Jesus Challenge Homeless Outreach Ministry, founded by a controversial religious leader, has been considering the Hartley Township property for its next location.

“That’s not a secret” that Jack Wisor has toured the former Laurelton Center grounds, said Dick DeVett, pastor of the West End Bible Fellowship Church, which occupies a building on the property.

“That happened within the last few months.”

In reports published in The New York Times and Punxsutawney Spirit, officials in the Jefferson County boroughs of Brockway and Brookville claim Wisor operates his shelters in dilapidated buildings that he doesn’t repair or maintain, and that some residents have tough criminal histories and need more supervision that Wisor provides.

DeVett’s congregation has been on the grounds about six years, and “the owner of property has been very gracious to us, big time,” DeVett said. But he could not speak to any possible connection between owner Gary Murphy and Wisor.

“I don’t know his feelings on it,” he said.

Union County’s Tax Assessment Office shows Murphy’s Mountain Valley Inc. owns the grounds’ 336 acres. All taxes on the property, worth more than \$4 million, are paid and current. The property is split between a 266-acre main campus and tracts of land covering six and 66 acres. The main campus has a deed restriction of no gambling.

Murphy bought the land in 2006, eight years after the state Department of Public Welfare closed Laurelton Center, which dates to 1917 and later housed mentally-challenged individuals. Mountain Valley Customs, an automotive detailing business, operated there until recently.

Steven Buttorff, a Hartley Township supervisor of more than 30 years, would say only that municipal officials are monitoring the situation closely.

Most people spoke cautiously about Wisor and his ministry.

Published reports about Wisor, and officials of Brockway and Brookville, detail an evangelical pastor with a self-proclaimed mission to help those whom no one else will help and have nowhere else to go.

Calls to the Brockway ministry were answered, but not by Wisor, who did not return two phone calls from The Daily Item.

According to the Just for Jesus website, Wisor is founder of the First Apostles' Doctrine Church of Brockway and Brookville and the Just for Jesus Challenge Homeless Outreach Ministry, claiming to be the largest faith-based homeless ministry in Pennsylvania with more than 1,100 people coming the Jefferson County boroughs in the past 11 years.

Brookville is the county seat with a population of about 4,000. Wisor's Brookville ministry is located in an old church in the business district zoned for "office/commercial use." However, because Just for Jesus is a religious organization, federal law exempts it from zoning rules, Brookville Borough Manager Chuck Gable said.

The federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act prohibits local governments from preventing religious organizations from carrying out their missions, the New York Times reported in 2008 when the ACLU filed a lawsuit against Brookville, which tried to get Wisor out of the location. Both sides reached a settlement, and Gable believes Wisor owns the property.

But the property is in poor condition, Gable said, and appears almost abandoned from the outside. Aside of visual inspections from the outside, "The only way we really can gain access to facility is if we have reasonable suspicion that there is an immediate

danger to health,” Gable said. “The health inspector has tried to gain access but hasn’t had a real reason to do so.”

“There has been, sometimes, issues with children in there,” Gable said.

Just for Jesus is required to provide a weekly list of residents to the Brookville Police Department, including when a resident is leaving or arriving at the shelter and if he or she is moving between sites in Brookville and Brockway.

People wanted on warrants have lived at the shelter at various times “and we’ve gone in and gotten them,” said Mollie Caun, secretary for the Brookville Police Department. “They must let in law enforcement.”

“I know the offenses of some people staying there,” Gable said. “I don’t know how many at a time are there. ...The concern is it’s common knowledge that these are individuals at various point of rehabilitation,” whether that be for substance abuse, mental health issues and others.

“Given the visual of the structure and the somewhat known entities living within that structure,” Gable said, “it’s concerning to citizens in an otherwise very quiet community.” There have been incidents in warmer weather of loitering and heckling, he said.

Officials in Snyder Township, Jefferson County, claimed in 2011 the Brockway shelter was inadequately staffed and did not have volunteers or certified employees to counsel and evaluate parolees and their psychological problems, the Punxsutawney Spirit reported.

There is no licensed staffing required for a homeless shelter, Wisor said in response, and that Just for Jesus is a church, no different than any other, the Spirit reported. He also told the Spirit the only required counseling for a sexually violent predator is a lifetime requirement to report to Megan’s Law counseling, in Brockway’s case in DuBois.

The Spirit also reported an investigation of an alleged rape at the shelter, which Wisor said had to deal with a mentally challenged individual who used that accusation “wherever she went” and dismissed a report the ministry took a fugitive to a bus station for a trip to Arizona, saying police were informed and never issued a warrant.

“We do care about the homeless. We care very much about the homeless. We’re not going to beat up on him,” DeVett said, “but we do not support Jack Wisor.” DeVett would not elaborate except to say the church has “very good reasons” for this stance, “some of them spiritual.”

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