Some South Austin residents remain skeptical of the city’s plans to develop a “housing-focused” shelter, saying they still have little to no idea how it will function or whether it might endanger people and children living nearby.

The City Council in June directed the city manager to buy an empty office building off Ben White Boulevard and Manchaca Road for the shelter, voting to spend up to $8.6 million for it.

“A lot of people react with this feeling of like ‘I was just almost attacked yesterday in my car,’” said Kathryn Kawazoe, who lives in the Galindo neighborhood near where the shelter will be built. “It’s a knee-jerk reaction like, ‘What? You’re putting that here?’ And then there’s fear” because they might not fully understand the plans for the shelter.

City officials say the shelter’s goal is get people into stable housing within 90 to 120 days of coming in, and residency will be entirely based on referrals, which means the shelter won’t be an intake facility like downtown’s Austin Resource Center for the Homeless was for decades. The new shelter is supposed to be the first of 10 such referral-based shelters in Austin, one for every council district.

The shelter’s location was announced just days before the council voted to direct the city manager to buy it and appropriated funding for it.

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Dozens of people who showed up at the June 20 council meeting said they felt blindsided by the council’s plans, and others expressed fears that the shelter would lead to more people living on the streets, something the Galindo and nearby South Lamar neighborhoods already deal with.

Some residents remain distrustful that the city won’t let the new shelter, which the city is calling a “housing center,” turn into a second ARCH.

**Holding Austin accountable**

The new shelter site is in Council Member Ann Kitchen’s district. Kitchen, who was repeatedly attacked at the June council meeting about the shelter, said she was not surprised by the concerns because this would be one of the first housing-focused shelters owned by the city.

“Of course (people are skeptical), because they don’t see anything,” Kitchen said. “A lot of people understand that you know that we can talk about it, but then we have to do it.”

Taylor Cook, program manager for the new shelter, acknowledged that ARCH started out with loftier plans than what it has become. However, the city hopes several measures will guard against such an outcome, Kitchen said, including a legally binding document that residents can use to hold the city accountable.

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The document, under development by city staffers, will call for measures to ensure security around the new shelter, like a ban on camping in the vicinity, as well as standards on how the shelter can be run and what services it will offer.

“It’s legally enforceable, and it attaches to the property, and so it will mean that we cannot operate the property unless we’re meeting those requirements,” Kitchen said. “You don’t just have to trust us that we’re going to do that. We’re actually putting that down in an enforceable way.”

Specific details are pending, but Cook said people at the shelter will receive a personal case manager who will meet with them on a regular basis and make sure they are on track for permanent housing and removing any barriers to that.

“We’re trying to keep their focus on resolving their homelessness, working in partnership with their case manager toward the exact same goal every day,” Cook said. “It is a very different kind of shelter model people haven’t seen.”

City spokesman David Green said the shelter will not be a “one-stop shop” like the 22-acre Haven for Hope facility in San Antonio, which Gov. Greg Abbott has lauded.
that offers temporary and permanent housing and health care.

Instead, the shelter will centralize services such as legal help, health care, job searches and applications for government assistance and welfare programs. It is modeled on facilities in California, North Carolina and Florida, Kitchen said, and recommendations from the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The California facility, South Napa Shelter, uses a "housing first" approach, according to its website. This involves finding people permanent housing and continuing support as they find a job, resolve medical problems and maintain a good landlord-tenant relationship. Another facility in Florida's Palm Beach County has a program that pays for the first and last month's rent and security deposits for people ready to move into permanent housing.

Getting neighbors involved

At the June council meeting, some residents said they wanted the shelter to be far away from downtown or in an industrial area away from neighborhoods.

But Kim Johnson, a past president of the South Lamar Neighborhood Association, said his neighborhood was OK with the new shelter being nearby, and is even likely to support it, but residents want to be more involved in the process for developing it.

LifeWorks and two Foundation Communities facilities, all of which help people find and maintain housing, are successful in the area because they have worked with residents and get feedback from them when issues arise, he said.

"A lot of people are open to try to make sure that it becomes a good neighbor," Johnson said. "The neighborhood is working with a couple of other adjacent properties and Galindo to try — for the people that are most readily impacted — and get some type of guidelines to help make it a good neighbor."

Kawazoe said some of the public uncertainty comes from a lack of public outreach: "It's like all people hear is 'Oh, we're putting a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, and it's going to council tomorrow.' It's like, 'What?' So people freak out."

Austin is hardly a stranger to shortages of affordable housing, but Kitchen said the city plans to use its recently passed $250 million affordable housing bond simultaneously with the shelter's development, as well as patch together housing from other sources like the Salvation Army to place people.

Kitchen said the new shelter will open in phases. If the city only has 30 beds in January, then the shelter will only accept 30 people to prevent a bottleneck.

However, this also means the city has to figure out how who gets in first, Cook said. Only people "ready and willing" to accept services will be allowed in, she said, and part of the reason why the shelter will be referral-based only.

"It's somewhere people are referred to because they're actively ready to engage with the system," Cook said. "It's going to be a subset of the population of homeless people who are ready to focus on housing, and that's going to accelerate the process for them. It's not, you know, going to be doors open for everybody."

The referral system is part of why city officials say the area around the shelter will be safe. Homeless people congregate around ARCH because you can go in and out, but anyone at the new shelter must be focused on finding housing. Security measures under consideration, city officials said, include a fence around the shelter, limitations on visitors and increased police presence to combat loitering.

"Part of that model is that there won't be a reason for people to just be hanging out," Cook said.

Many details about the shelter have yet to be nailed down, like who will manage it. Yet, Kitchen said the city is on track for a midwinter opening, adding that if the facility turns out as planned, she hopes Austinites will have more faith in the next one the city wants to build.

"When they talk about the center, what they're concerned about is there are concerns about what might happen outside," Kitchen said, referencing the crowds that often surround ARCH on all sides. "People are saying that they don't want that to continue, and they have questions about how the city is going to address it ... so what we're doing is stripping away what has been that sort of a veneer of handling these issues that never has worked and certainly not working now."