

# Avon parish split over vote to close school

By Teresa A. Parsons and Rob Cullivan  
Courier staff

AVON — More than 60 parents, school board members and other supporters of St. Agnes School in Avon are challenging an April 17 vote by parish council members recommending that the parish administrator ask diocesan officials for permission to close the school this June.

Brother Brian Walsh, diocesan superintendent of schools, said he could not confirm the parish council's vote since he has not yet received any such request in writing. He did confirm, however, that St. Agnes' late pastor, Father Charles Bennett, wrote the diocese in December outlining

financial problems with the school and asking for assistance.

Brother Walsh said diocesan officials have since had several meetings with parish and school leaders in Avon. Although the diocese's March deadline for announcing school closings has passed, Brother Walsh pointed out that "there has been an ongoing process."

Father John Mulligan, vicar general of the diocese, said Monday, April 23, that diocesan officials had received the parish council's recommendation, and would be studying it along with such areas as the school's enrollment trends and fiscal health before deciding whether to accept the recommendation.

Those who oppose the possibility of St. Agnes closing say diocesan officials will find an improving financial picture, stable enrollment, and strong support among parishioners.

A survey distributed during Masses at St. Agnes last weekend asked parishioners whether they support the council's 9-6 vote. Michael Carroll, school board president, reported that 281 parishioners had voted no, while 91 voted yes.

Carroll and other school supporters are also questioning the process parish council members followed in voting. As school board representative to the parish council, Carroll said he was present when the council in March planned an open forum and

vote on the school's future for late April.

Instead, a council meeting and public forum was announced April 15 for the following Tuesday night. Despite the short notice, Carroll said, 28 people signed up to speak; 26 of whom favored keeping the school open and accepting a diocesan subsidy of \$15,000.

Instead of a public vote as promised, however, Carroll said 13 council members voted in executive session with a 9-6 result — including absentee ballots — favoring closing.

Peter Dougherty, parish council president, said that the council had only planned to keep the forum on the matter open to the public, adding that the council voted in a closed session because it thought supporters of the school closing would be subjected to heavy-handed public criticism from opponents of the school closing.

Dougherty added that the school board did not "opt to tell the people" earlier in the year about the possible school closing matter for fear that registration for 1990-91 would suffer. He noted that the issue was scheduled to be discussed at a parish council meeting on March 28, but was tabled because information on such matters as the school's financial health was unavailable.

A year earlier, according to Carroll, a parish survey showed a 2-1 margin of support among parishioners for continued school ministry. Asked how much they would contribute to the school, survey respondents pledged \$31,000, of which \$16,000 has been budgeted.

But Dougherty pointed out that Carroll's contentions must be qualified. For example, Dougherty said that the survey to which Carroll refers, was meant to gauge support for all of the parish's ministries, not just the school. Hence, Dougherty said, all of the ministries received majority support in the survey.

Dougherty added that the majority of survey respondents pledged to "give" extra money weekly to support all of the ministries. Yet, when asked if they wanted to allot most of the extra money collected for the school, the parishioners nearly split evenly, with a substantial minority opposing giving most of the extra weekly collection money to the school, he said.

"Yes, people voted for the school," Dougherty stated, "but I could come back and say they voted for (catechism classes),"

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## Parishes anticipate CFC shelter opening

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On Friday, April 27, the Catholic Family Center is scheduled to take ownership of a building that will be converted into a year-round 24-hour facility for chronically homeless men and women.

The building — previously a warehouse for Preferred Electric on Joseph Avenue — will be transformed into the Francis Hospitality Center, which will provide 24 permanent beds, six emergency beds and such support services as mental-health, drug and alcohol counseling; job assessment; and literacy training.

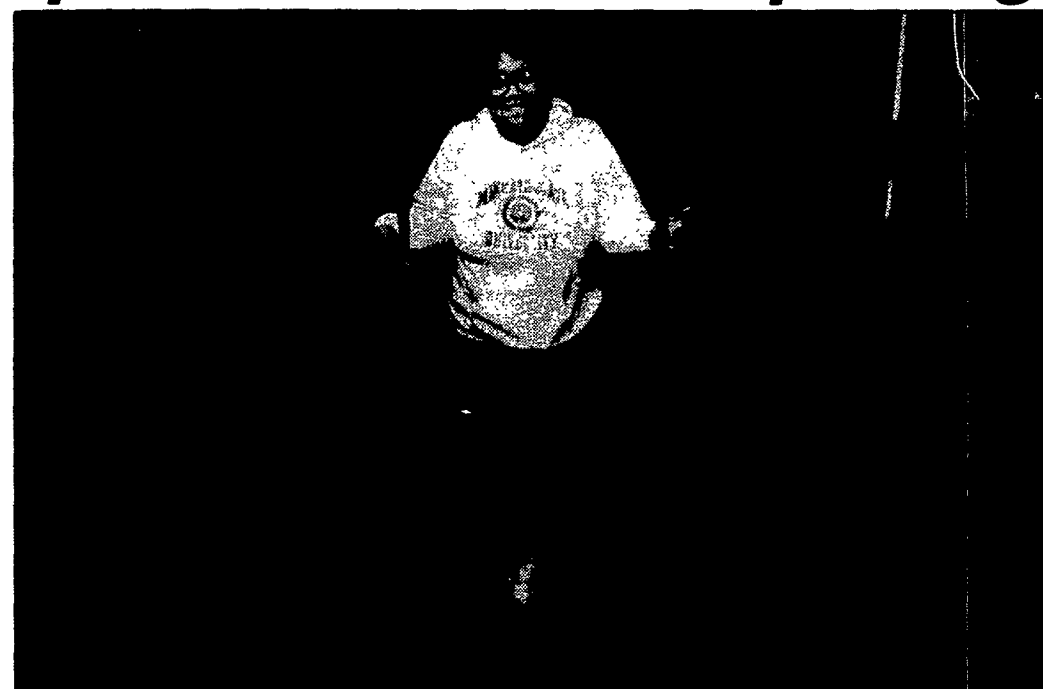
CFC has received more than \$600,000 in state, county and city monies to pay for the building's renovation. The center will begin accepting construction bids on July 1, according to William Privett, director of resource development for CFC. Renovation work should begin by August 1, he said, adding that Francis Center should be open sometime in February or March of 1991.

Such news should be music to ears of those who operate overnight shelters at two Catholic parishes — St. Bridget's and Blessed Sacrament. The staffs of both shelters have long awaited the opening of Francis Center, which they hope will put them out of business.

For the past eight years, both parish facilities offered homeless people refuge from the cold during the months of November through April. St. Bridget's serves meals to about 40 guests a day, said Linda Rosier, the shelter's director, who added that 10 beds are available for homeless men. Blessed Sacrament offers beds for 17 men and three women, and usually operates at near-to-full capacity, according to Richard Sadowski, director.

Rosier and Sadowski noted that because Francis Center's opening date is indefinite, the parish shelters will remain open next winter. Corpus Christi's Dimitri House will continue to operate when Francis Center opens next year, according to Lillian Piersante, Dimitri's director.

Piersante noted that Dimitri's decision to stay open is grounded philosophically. "We figure if every church did a little bit



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer  
Linda Rosier, director of St. Bridget's Parish shelter, stands amid stacked metal bedframes used for homeless guests from November through April. The shelter completed its eighth season earlier this month.

... we wouldn't need a big center," she said.

The three parishes, along with help from neighboring churches, have each "done a bit" since they began operating the shelter network in the early 1980s, relying on hundreds of volunteers to stay open. "Without (volunteers) we wouldn't have a network," Sadowski said.

Francis Center's opening will take some, if not all, of the burden off the volunteers who constitute the parish shelter network — a burden that can become quite heavy, Sadowski said.

The director noted that staffing his shelter turns into a scheduling nightmare as spring approaches and volunteers' enthusiasm wanes. "I think at the beginning of the season, volunteers are plentiful," he said, noting that as the shelters "get into the final push ... you call (volunteers), and they're very politely telling you 'I can't.'"

Sadowski noted that working with the homeless can be frustrating, since many shelter guests suffer from addictions and the problem of homelessness has not improved to any measurable degree over the last few years. "You have the same

problem with different faces," he said.

The chore of transporting the homeless already was lifted from the shoulders of shelter directors this year. In December, the Catholic Family Center contracted with the city to run a shelter-shuttle service that transports homeless clients to shelters with available beds.

Privett noted that as of March 31, the service had provided 1,666 rides to clients. Sadowski praised the shuttle service for relieving shelter volunteers of the daunting task of driving clients to alternate housing. "(The shelter-shuttle service) was an excellent add to the process," he said. "Quite honestly, I'm glad we don't have that headache anymore."

Sadowski and Rosier must still grapple with the possibility that even when the Francis Center opens it may not completely solve the problem of sheltering Rochester's

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