

Leaders Protest Mental Health Center Expansion

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Eastern San Fernando Valley community and church leaders spoke out Saturday against plans to almost double the capacity of a residential mental health facility in Lake View Terrace.

"We feel we've already been inundated with this type of facility," said Fred Taylor, president of Focus '90, an organization that is working with the Ministers Fellowship of the Greater San Fernando Valley to improve the area's image.

"This area has become a slum, a dumping ground," said the Rev. James Wade, pastor of the Universal Church of the Valley in Pacoima. Wade told the group of 20 civic leaders who attended the meeting

Please see CENTER, B4

← FOCUS

B4

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JOE VITTI / Los Angeles Times

Community leaders Fred Taylor, left, and Bill McMillan spoke out against expanding a rehabilitation center.

CENTER: Expansion Protested

Continued from B3

that government officials have tried to locate dumps, mental institutions and prisons in the working-class suburb.

Operators of the Foothill Health and Rehabilitation Center at 12260 Foothill Blvd. are proposing to expand the center from 220 to 420 beds. David Weiss, the head of the center, was invited to Saturday's meeting to discuss his plans, but did not attend.

Weiss could not be reached for comment, but Katherine Barger, an aide to Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich, said Weiss told her he couldn't come to a meeting on a Saturday because of his religion. He is Jewish and it was his Sabbath. However, he does want to work with the community, Barger said. She offered to help set up another meeting between Weiss and community leaders.

Taylor said he has identified

more than 15 facilities that provide residential care for the mentally ill in the area.

"There are more," he said. "They're putting them here because they don't want them in Encino or Woodland Hills."

Taylor said residents already have problems with people who live at the rehabilitation center. "These people come and go as they please," he said. "These people are not being treated. They're just being housed."

He and others at the meeting said that center residents loiter, sit and drink liquor on curbs, fall asleep on homeowners' lawns and often beg for money from passers-by.

"Our women are afraid to go to church at night," Wade said.

More than one speaker compared plans to expand the center to last year's ill-fated attempt by the nonprofit Phoenix House to establish a 210-bed drug-treatment

center in the community.

"What we have here is another Phoenix House," said Bill McMillan, president of the Hansen Hills Homeowners Assn. "We fought Phoenix House and won. And we'll fight this."

Phoenix House abandoned plans for the drug treatment center because of opposition from residents.

Lewis Snow, president of the Lake View Terrace Home Owners Assn., said research into city files showed that a permit for the expansion was granted to the rehabilitation center in 1987. However, the expansion was not begun and the permit expired, he said.

Snow said he would send a letter Monday asking that the Los Angeles city Planning Department inform Weiss that he must reapply for the permit.

"Then, they will have to hold new public hearings on the expansion," he said. "We must fight this."