



Articles dated 1990-1999



Thursday, September 11, 1997
The Arizona Republic

Legislators vow to fight for care home

Lawmakers pledge help for home

Pioneers' facility under state review

By Judy Nichols
The Arizona Republic

PRESCOTT --- The legislators stepped tentatively into the lobby of the Arizona Pioneers' Home on Wednesday, carefully weaving their way through the walkers, oxygen tanks and extra chairs set out for the overflow crowd.

Within two hours, they promised the more than 200 people crammed into the meeting that they would do everything possible to keep the home open.

They saw family members cry as they described the good care at the home, listened to angry citizens criticize the government for "putting a price on everything and a value on nothing," and heard residents ask why they would be thrown out into the street while the state continues to house criminals.

"Look at those faces," Rep. Sue Gerard, R-north-central Phoenix, said afterward. "It would be like throwing your mother out of the house."

The crowd, including some who had flown in from out of state, crammed into the front room of the three-story brick building, which opened in 1911 and now houses 160 longtime Arizona residents.

It was the first of several meetings to be held as part of the "sunset review" of the home, mandated every 10 years.

Nearly 20 legislators, supervisors and city officials were seated in the front, close enough to see the face of Melissa Ruffner.

"Last September, my aunt died here, and she was well cared for," Ruffner said, tears flowing down her cheeks. "This is not about finances, it's not about computers, it's about how much lives are worth."

There was a collective rustling in the crowd, people sniffing into handkerchiefs as Ruffner continued through her sobs.

"The water you drink comes from dams constructed by these people. They're the miners, the ranchers, the farmers who built our state. You cannot put a value on that."

Many of the speakers criticized a state audit that lists \$7.9 million in renovations necessary to bring the home up to current building and fire codes, including things like replacing the wooden roof supports with steel girders required under today's codes.

"We don't need \$7.9 million to do this job," Ruffner said. "These people have made do their entire lives. We can do this by the sweat of our brow, the love in our hearts for these people who are a valuable part of this state's history."

Then Ruffner squared her shoulders and challenged the politicians to find a way to save the home.

"Don't make me chain myself to that front door," she said, inspiring applause and slaps on the back as she made her way back to her spot by the front door.

The audit also questions the state subsidy of the home, which amounted to \$4 million last year, and its use of funds from the Miners' Hospital Endowment Fund.

The Miners' Hospital was authorized in 1929, but never built. Instead, an infirmary was built at the Pioneers' Home and miners were allowed to live there for free. An attorney general's opinion states that money from the miners' fund was supposed to go to a hospital, and the home does not qualify.

But Jeanine Dike, the home's superintendent, said it fulfills the intent, which was to provide a retirement home for the miners.

Margaret Pehl, whose mother-in-law lives at the home, questioned whether the state had the authority to close the home.

"The land the building were gifts," Pehl said. "How would you begin to think of closing the home?"

And Nancy Burgess, who wrote the application that put the home on the National Register of Historic Places, said some of the renovations may be unnecessary because historic buildings are exempt from many building codes and accessibility requirements.

Rept. Jake Flake, R-Snowflake, chairman of the sunset committee, tried to reassure residents: "We will do everything we can to keep this place open."

Afterward, Rep. Richard Kyle, R-Chandler, stood near the front door, fuming.

"I'm so irritated," he said. "It was wrong to scare these people. There's no way we're going to close this place down."



