

Task Force recommendations target getting transients off the streets.

# Vagrancy

## Group uses hard glove, soft fist with vagrants

Two well-dressed women walk briskly through Eugene's Downtown Mall as daylight fades into darkness, casually exchanging ideas about an upcoming meeting. Suddenly, they lower their voices and quicken their pace, trying to hurry by a group of shabbily-dressed transients "hanging out" on the street corner.

The situation is a fairly common one in Eugene: the homeless, even if harmless, produce fear in passersby. It is this fear the city of Eugene is working to eliminate. And the only way to eliminate the fear, say city officials, is to eliminate its cause.

That's why, following a preliminary report by council member Mark Lindberg, the City Council formed a task force in January to research the city's vagrancy problem and possible solutions.

Lindberg, who also is with the University's planning, public policy and management department, helped the council appoint 12 members to the Vagrancy Task Force.

And Sept. 12, after eight months of research, community outreach and interviews, the task force completed its task, offering the City Council a 16-page report recommending 24 ways for Eugene to deal with its homeless.

### Is Eugene too attractive?

Although it's difficult to figure the number of vagrants in Eugene — one report estimates between 500 and 4,000 — Lindberg says Eugene has a higher than average transient population.

One reason for this, he says, is the beauty of the Northwest, especially during summer months. Eugene, in particular, may attract the homeless because it is close to Interstate 5 and the railroad, and because the police department and social services are "fairly civilized."

"It's kind of a blessing and a curse that we're nice people," he says.

But Eugene's transients don't represent a large crime factor, despite some misleading statistics, Lindberg says.

In its final report, the task force cites a Eugene Police Department statistic that says 82 percent of "consumption" or alcohol-related crimes are committed by "transients or street alcoholics." And 26 percent of people taken into custody for minor disturbances cannot give an address or they give the address of the Mission, a local shelter for the homeless, Lindberg says.

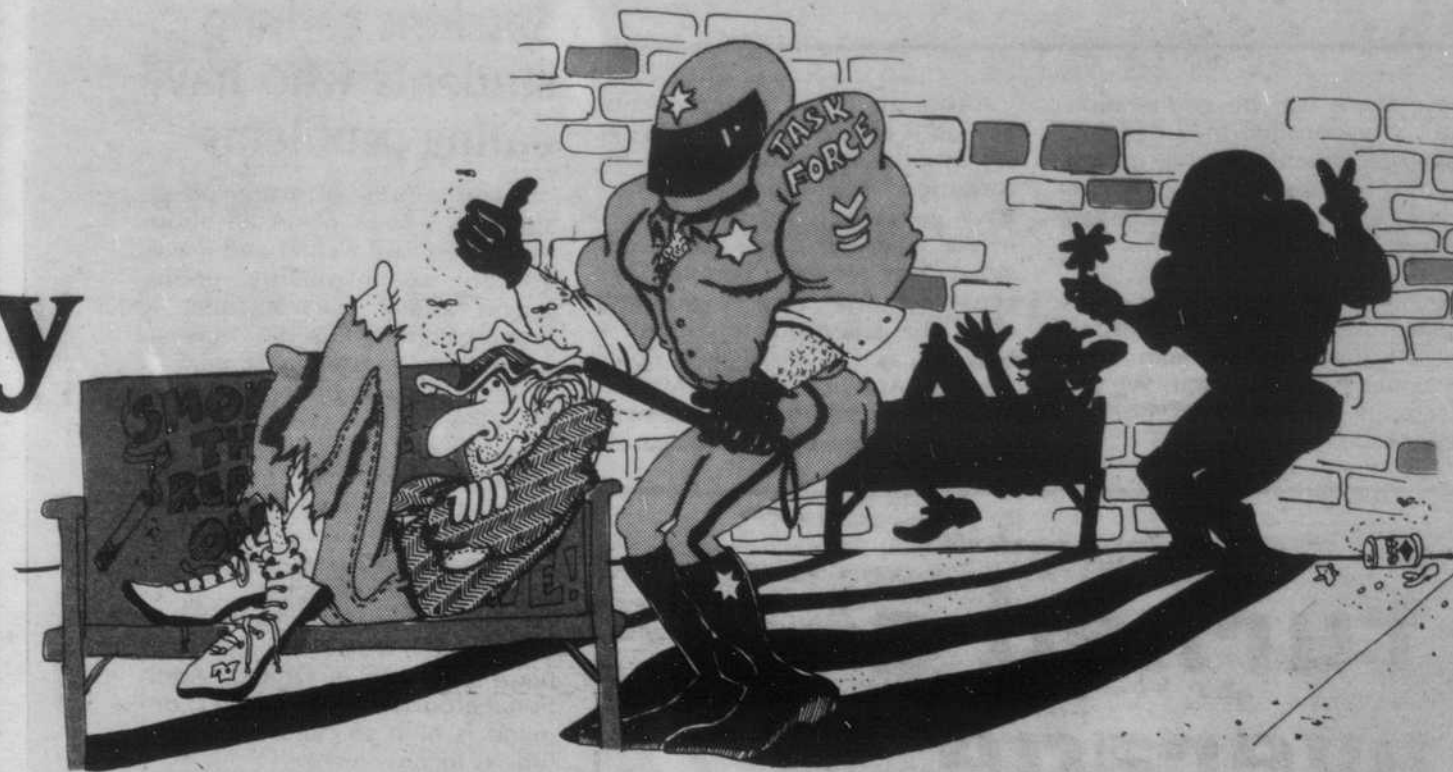
But he says that vagrants rarely are involved in "major crimes," and that "at least three-fourths" of violations involving transients are for minor disturbances such as drinking in city parks.

"We came to the conclusion that a segment of the transient population — maybe 15 percent — were pretty much criminals," Lindberg says.

But the other 85 percent are harmless.

"The fear that something is going to happen is greater than the chance of it happening," he says.

That fear and the "physical blight" of wanderers became the target of the task force.



Graphic by Shawn Bird

### A hard line with a soft touch

While trying to use force to eliminate those problems, the task force also took heed to the problems of the homeless. Since the project combines enforcement with an increase in services for the homeless, it has been called a "soft glove, hard fist" approach.

Because transients tend to congregate downtown, many of the task force recommendations concentrate on that area.

In fact, three suggestions target the city's two plasma donor centers, where indoor waiting rooms often overflow onto the sidewalk.

The recommendation to improve waiting-room facilities already is paying off. Remodeling of the Hyland Plasma Donor Center and construction of Lane Transit District bus shelters downtown have "resulted in a noticeable reduction in the number of pedestrians stagnating on that corner," says the final task force report.

The other two recommendations concerning donor centers may be a little slower coming.

The report suggests requiring conditional-use permits and licenses for proposed plasma centers before development. This would force center operators to meet specific regulations and possibly to pay a fee. It might even prohibit them from operating in certain zones of the city.

That idea doesn't go over so well with Kim Bedell, director of the Eugene Plasma Corporation.

"Some of the solutions I don't agree with because I'm running a business here. I don't want to move. This is a good location here," Bedell says.

The task force's final recommendations also deal heavily with parks and camping areas.

As a result of one suggestion, the City Council approved an ordinance July 11 prohibiting camping in parks and public places.

The task force also recommended establishing low-cost or free public camping near Eugene and issuing permits for groups who want to provide "public services," such as free lunch programs, in public places.

And shelter facilities such as the Mission received the group's support. This should take some transients off the streets, the report predicts.

### High hopes

Will the work of the task force prove helpful, or will downtown mall customers and the rest of Eugene have to continue dodging the city's transients?

So far, almost everyone involved with the project has high hopes and positive expectations for its success.

The City Council praised the task force's work at its Sept. 12 meeting, calling it "sensitive and constructive."

And Dave Fidanque, of the Lane County chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, says the task force

has been "very sympathetic to our concerns."

The ACLU approached the task force because it was worried certain recommendations might promote selective enforcement.

One original task-force recommendation called for arresting vagrants instead of issuing citations. But the final report dropped that suggestion, partly because of ACLU complaints that it was unconstitutional, Fidanque says.

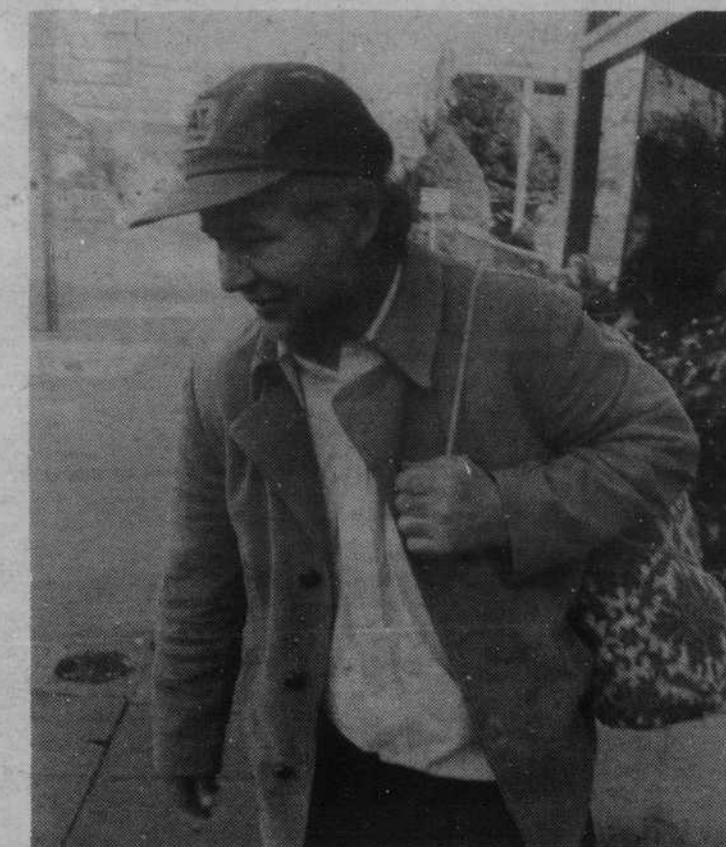
"We're going to continue monitoring the situation, but in general, this final recommendation is a big improvement over the initial recommendation," he says.

Lindberg has high hopes for the project, saying he already has noticed positive results.

Reports from merchants and downtown customers have signaled measured success there, he says. With the improvements at the corner of 10th Avenue and Willamette Street, seniors are less intimidated.

"You can drive down the street and see that it's different," Lindberg says.

Story by Michele Matassa  
Photo by Polly Kaplan



The task force hopes to erase the "physical blight" of transients.

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