



Across the Fence

What should communities and local government do about homelessness?

We must provide affordable housing and social services for the homeless

When the La Grande City Council voted unanimously on Dec. 4 to allow the Union County Warming Station to operate in its new location, we moved closer to meeting the emergency needs of some of our homeless neighbors for shelter from freezing temperatures.

Testimony by many residents supporting or opposing the appeal of the warming station's conditional use permit made clear that we must address an issue far greater than temporary respite from the cold. Speaker after speaker supported action to reduce homelessness in Union County. Mayor Steven Clements reflected the wishes of proponents and opponents alike when he promised to provide leadership bringing differing sides in the warming station controversy together to address local homelessness.

Union County residents are not homeless by choice. They are part of the nearly 554,000 Americans who are homeless on any given night. Their lack of homes is part of the national deficit of 7.2 million rental homes inexpensive enough for persons with the lowest incomes to afford.

When rents are high and affordable housing unavailable, our neighbors are forced to live on the streets or in temporary accommodations not available to all. La Grande needs to address the crisis of our lack of affordable housing. This will take time and our concerted efforts. Union County progressives and Democrats look forward to working with the mayor and all concerned citizens of Union County to ensure that all residents have access to good quality affordable housing.

Why are people homeless? According to the Oregon Community Foundation's 2019 report "Homelessness in Oregon," some people are homeless because of highly challenging personal circumstances — for example, mental illness, addiction, lack of job skills or lack of jobs. These individuals need sustained, intensive support from traditional, local homeless agencies.

Emergency shelters and social services, as important as they are, cannot solve the homeless crisis. More than 150,000 Oregon households experience at least short-term homelessness because of high housing costs and lack of affordable housing units. Growing numbers of severely cost-burdened Oregon renters are on the verge of homelessness.



BILL WHITAKER
UNION COUNTY PROGRESSIVES/
DEMOCRATS

Homelessness and housing instability impose high costs on families and especially on children through learning loss, lower rates of educational attainment and lower lifetime earnings.

The Oregon Community Foundation report also shows 5% of students enrolled in Union County schools were homeless during the 2017-18 school year. During 2018-19 school year, there were 153 homeless students in the La Grande School District. And 25-30% of households in Union County are "housing cost burdened," paying more than 30% of their gross income on housing and utilities. For many households at the lowest income levels (i.e., below 50% median family income), the market fails to deliver any suitable housing at affordable costs.

During 2016-17, federal rent assistance programs helped 56,000 low-income renters in Oregon; 153,000 low-income renters received no help and were "severely cost burdened," paying more than half of their family incomes for rent and utilities. Only 29% of Oregon households in need of federal housing assistance are receiving it. All of Oregon's "severely cost burdened" low-income renters who receive no federal assistance are at risk of homelessness.

There is not enough affordable housing available in Union County. From 2010-2016 Union County built only 0.61 new housing units for each household that formed.

Housing Matters Union County, a housing collaborative of local government, social service agencies, landlords and other concerned citizens believes expanding the local affordable housing market and providing support services is the foundation of thriving communities. Studies show that the ability to obtain safe, affordable and secure housing leads to incredible benefits for families and the communities we live in. Crime goes down, tax dollars are saved and productivity is increased.

With our communities being designated as "severely rent burdened," it is vital that all Union County residents concerned about homelessness come together to provide the affordable housing and social services needed to end our crisis of homelessness. This will require local, state and

Warming Station failures demand community action

Union County Warming Station goals are to provide a warm place at night for the homeless living in La Grande. That goal will be partially reached when the shelter on Third Street is functional. That vacated office building is ostensibly the only available spot in town. The warming station's website states its mission is "to provide a welcoming, safe, and compassionate place where all people can stay the night and are offered resources and pathways toward housing stability." I think we can all admire and support such a mission; so I encourage those who agree to make a donation of time or money to the Union County Warming Station.

What are the objections to setting up a warming station in the selected location? La Grande downtown urban renewal efforts have been underway for decades, making progress, losing a little, regaining a little, etc. For years, considerable expense has been put into making Downtown La Grande a beautiful place to attract viable businesses, the shopping public and tourist traffic.

Since Al Adelsberger's name has been thrust into this discussion, consider why he might object to a warming station opening its doors across the street from one of his projects. His philanthropy has been a labor of love for La Grande and Eastern Oregon. And he has been appreciated for his generosity and large-scale improvements to the downtown area, including the New Town Square on Washington Avenue and major construction and renovation projects on Adams Avenue, to no personal gain. Could it be he wants to see Market Place Fresh Foods and surrounding small businesses thrive?

For the plight of downtown merchants in La Grande, just walk the sidewalks of Adams Avenue to see several vacant street-front business locations. This attests to the tenuous existence of those who open a business hoping to survive long enough to profit from the effort and employ local citizens. The La Grande City Council, having involvement with the Urban



WES RAMPTON
UNION COUNTY REPUBLICANS

Renewal Agency, should have no difficulty in understanding the desire of downtown merchants to keep the area safe for shoppers and free from the optics of Burnside in Portland.

Marco Rennie, co-owner of Market Place Fresh Foods, shared that he recognizes the need for a warming station but that it's not fully addressed by this Third Street plan. Since Fresh Foods has been open, he has donated more than 12,000 pounds of food, amounting to \$3,000 a month, to Community Connection. He does not consider himself an antagonist, but he would like to see more effective planning.

The failure is on multiple fronts. The Union County Warming Station began the process of getting permits to use the property at such a late date that any opposition to it would put them in the exact place they are now. The city council chose not to notify local businesses, practically ensuring an appeal would come forth. The selected site is measurably inadequate to the task at hand with maximum capacity accommodating 26 people of the many more in the community who are in need of that service. Adequate planning for this shelter was observably absent. The location was determined by a rushed expediency, not a reasoned, well-planned approach.

Compassion is not accomplished by locating a warming shelter in a place that pits members of the community against one another. Nor is compassion being extended to those who are expected to bear the burden while trying to run their businesses and survive into the next year.

What have we learned? Now, not later, is time to plan for a fair location for a warming station that meets everyone's needs. The La Grande City Council is not the Politburo. This is a time for affected and concerned citizens of La Grande to come together.

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Phone: **541-963-3161**

Toll free (Oregon): 1-800-422-3110
Fax: 541-963-7804
Email: news@lagrandeobserver.com
Website: www.lagrandeobserver.com
Street address: 1406 Fifth St., La Grande

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