

Happy (legal) campers

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

The Eugene Homeless Camping program has three main elements:

1) An ordinance allows camping on public or private property if particular conditions are met. In non-residential properties there is a maximum of three campers per location. The city of Eugene provides a limited number of legal spaces on City property.

2) Police enforcement of on-street camping is typically responded to on a complaint basis.

3) The city contracts with St. Vincent dePaul (SVDP) to manage the city's spaces, support other legal spaces, and to be the first responder to on-street camping complaints.

More than a decade ago, the city of Eugene took a radical approach to common sense: faced with a homeless population it had neither the resources nor capacity to address, the city changed course and instituted a homeless camping program.

That was in 1998, and the program today has a backlog of people without homes that need a place to camp in safety and without penalty. The program is managed by St. Vincent DePaul, and the man at the helm of matching up campers with lots on public, private and faith-based properties is Keith Heath.

Currently there are 20 legal spaces managed by St. Vincent dePaul, including 10 on city property. The faith-based community offers some additional spaces for families, along with sites that are not managed by SVDP. Typically the spaces are for a 90-day period with the hope that the campers, age 18 or over, can use the time to transition to housing or another situation.

The program is at capacity. Heath says there is a waiting list of about 50 to 60 homeless people seeking a camping space. Campers must check in through the Eugene Service Station each week to remain on the list.

In Portland, advocates, attorneys and city officials have been hashing out possible changes to the city's camping ordinance, and Eugene's program for homeless campers is being looked at as a model for possible modifications.

Heath says the program has drawn considerable attention of late, as other cities consider new approaches to alleviate the growing crisis on their streets.

Joanne Zuhl: *What's the demand for this kind of program in Eugene and the surrounding area?*

Keith Heath: According to the 2009 annual count of homeless people,

homelessness has continually increased each year. The number of people who are chronically homeless has grown from 16 percent of the local homeless population four years ago, to over 50 percent today. Homeless residents of Eugene who camp in vehicles on the street are typically under-employed, unemployed, and in many cases, disabled. There are not enough subsidized housing, social-service and treatment programs available to meet the demand.

J.Z.: *What was the city's and the community's attitude toward campers?*

"The relationships between the camper and business owners is great, The campers are grateful the chance to have a safe place to park and will help out in any possible way to stay where they are. In some cases it turns into paid work."

K.H.: While the City's program is innovative and is generally considered successful, it is at best a response to a large problem and not a solution. Some in the community argue that the police should be more aggressive at enforcing the camping laws. This is an approach that has been tried and the result was increased police time spent on this issue (at the expense of other enforcement needs), greater anger and stress on the streets among homeless people and no greater success at reducing homelessness. Others in the community argue that Eugene criminalizes homelessness and people have no choice if they are to live. Homelessness is an uncomfortable community problem with no easy answers and many challenges.

J.Z.: *Whenever these types of proposals get discussed, there are always concerns. How did*



— KEITH HEATH (ABOVE)
OVERNIGHT PARKING PROGRAM, ST. VINCENT DEPAUL, LAKE COUNTY

you get the city, businesses and churches on board with this?

K.H.: There are "hot spots" in town where camping complaints are common. Neighbors often won't object to an individual camper but when a larger camp begins to congregate there are usually problems. In some cases, erecting signs that prohibit parking during overnight hours has resolved problems at a specific location. However, as one location is resolved, campers move on to populate another area.

Police report that the program generally works smoothly and is an excellent example of a partnership with a non-profit organization that saves the city's resources of time and money while providing a consistent service for homeless people. St. Vincent dePaul's camping facilitator also

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PDC unloads affordable housing site in South Waterfront

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

The League of Women Voters is calling on the city to stand behind its agreement to build affordable housing in the North Macadam Urban Renewal Area after a preliminary agreement indicates the Portland Development Commission is dropping 400 promised units.

The agreement releases the PDC from its previous agreement to invest \$4 million into Block 33, build 400 affordable housing sites there, and removes any obligation for the site to reserve units at 0-60 percent of median family income – the poorest and most difficult to subsidize population.

The deal is that PDC gives up Block 33 to the Oregon Health and Science University for \$3 million – \$1 million in transportation charge credits and a maximum of \$2 million from the sale of the property.

According to City Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau, that money can then be redirected to another site in the North Macadam URA,

Block 49. The plans for development on Block 49 include 209 affordable housing units, with 40 to 50 dedicated to formerly homeless veterans.

Fish said that Block 33 was no longer viable for multiple reasons, and that his focus is on Block 49, which is already \$2 million into plans for developing 150 units for homeless veterans.

"We made a commitment to our homeless veterans," Fish said. "Block 33 is a challenged site and, currently, there is not enough money to do both."

The League of Women Voters wants to make sure the 400 units once promised don't fall off the map. Here's what the League had to say in a letter to the City Council:

"The North Macadam urban renewal area is 11 years old. To date not one unit of affordable housing has been developed. Many of the other projects outlined in the plan and the Central District Development Agreement, however, have been completed or are near-completion including the OHSU

tram, streetcar, condo towers, streets and sidewalks, and Elizabeth Caruthers Park. During the early planning for this district fears were expressed that this area might become an enclave for the wealthy. Given the amount of public resources that will be devoted to this district we urge you to ensure that fear is not borne out.

Portland Housing Bureau Director Margaret Van Vliet noted that the Block 33 plan was set out well before the revenue from the Urban Renewal Area was known, and the expensive level of construction on that site didn't pencil out for affordable housing. The URA draws revenue for projects from tax increment financing, or TIF, 30 percent of which is set aside for affordable housing projects.

Van Vliet said that she and the PHB are going to work to find affordable housing apartments elsewhere in the area, and as the North Macadam area develops, more money – dedicated through the 30 percent set-aside in taxes – should become available to put toward affordable housing.

"But it's not there right now," Van Vliet said.

Van Vliet said it is not clear on the obligation to replace quid pro quo the 400 units and 0-60 percent housing from Block 33, but that regardless of those figures, she says she will try to establish affordable housing wherever possible.

"The recent (tax increment finance) report showed signs of progress in the overall meeting of income targets, however if you look at the TIF report as a whole, the city has failed to meet 0-30 percent income targets in many districts, including North Macadam," says Julie Massa, Portland Policy Coordinator with Oregon Opportunity Network. "The city had plans to dig deep on TIF funds for North Macadam, but they wouldn't have reached the lower-income targets with Block 33."

"In light of these new developments, we want to make sure there's a return on public housing investment that benefits all income levels in any projects moving forward," Massa says.