


 Housing Rural Oregon

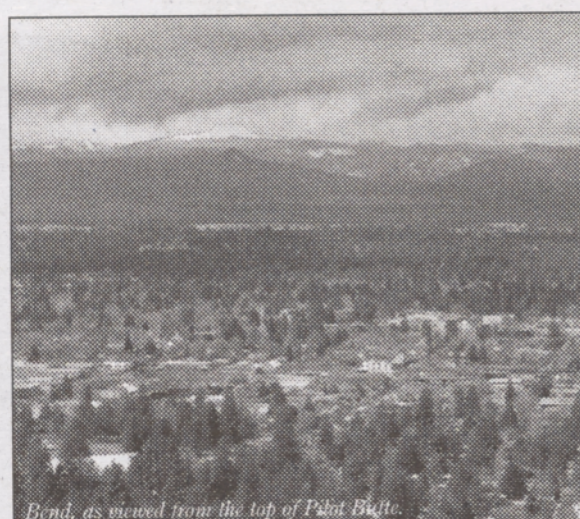


The price to pay?

Central Oregon's local governments struggle with whether or not to fund homeless services, while finding ways to promote affordable housing construction



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Bend, as viewed from the top of Pilot Butte.

Poverty – with a view

Part 5 The price to pay?

Once a rural timber and agricultural region, Central Oregon is now beset with a housing shortage and an increase in homelessness. How will the region respond as it continues to grow?

About this series

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. It is the fourth in a collection of stories looking at Central Oregon. Read previous articles from the series at news.streetroots.org/ruralhousing

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At the southern edge of Bend's downtown district, off of busy Northeast Division Street, lies Harmony House.

A former nursing facility that closed last year, Harmony House is made up of a three-story main building and dozens of detached cottages that were used as independent living homes strung along the back of the property.

When the property went up for sale, public officials and social-service providers thought it would be the perfect place to create something in short supply in Central Oregon: supportive housing for formerly homeless and low-income people.

But a private developer bought the property before funding could be secured. The property now sits vacant and unused.

"It was a big letdown," said Tom Kemper, the recently retired executive director of Housing Works, Central Oregon's public housing authority.

The number of homeless people has grown dramatically in Central Oregon: according to recently released preliminary results of this year's Point in Time Count, there are 787 homeless people living in Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties. That is a 12 percent increase over last year. The vast majority, 70 percent, camp outside.

The presence of homelessness and the shortage of affordable housing has forced the region's local governments to confront a new public policy challenge: Should homeless services be funded with government dollars? It is one of many questions local government and public policy officials must confront as

the Central Oregon region continues to respond to its housing crisis.

J.W. TERRY, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR of Central Oregon Veterans Organization, or COVO, a social services agency serving homeless people in Central Oregon, had high hopes for Harmony House.

The cottages and assisted living apartments could have been converted into 58 units of low-income housing. The housing would have come with supportive services for the tenants, such as mental health services, substance abuse counseling, case management, as well as shower and laundry. A Mosaic Medical clinic could have been located on the site.

"We need a campus," Terry said. "That's the bottom line. We need somewhere where ... all the help they need is right there."

COVO was one of many organizations interested in collaboratively purchasing the Harmony House property. The City of Bend's Affordable Housing program was willing to kick in money toward the \$1.3 million purchase, as was Housing Works, Central Oregon's public housing authority, and county government.

It would have been the first time that city and county government collaborated with local service agencies to create a service center for low-income and homeless people in Central Oregon.

"There's that desire in the community, among the county, the city and the private non-profit levels to do something like that," Kathy Skidmore, COVO's deputy director, said. "It's just a matter of money."

To Portlanders, the idea that government would not fund homeless services might seem illogical. The city of Portland and Multnomah County dedicate tens of millions of dollars for homeless services each year – for eviction prevention, rent assistance, shelters, and other services. This year, Portland mayor Ted Wheeler's proposed budget includes \$31.2 million dollars for the city-county Joint Office of Homeless Services.

But in Central Oregon – encompassing Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties – local government provides very little money toward homeless and other social services. Deschutes County allocates some discretionary funding to specific projects or programs, and city governments provide nothing.

There are only two year-round shelters for homeless adults, the Bethlehem Inn and the Shepherd's Door, which, combined, shelter approximately 100 people a night. There is also one youth shelter. Churches throughout Central Oregon provide shelter during the winter, but that changes year from year.

There are no low-barrier shelters and very few low-barrier services, which would allow people with criminal backgrounds and drug addictions to access services.

In Redmond, Jericho Table is the only direct social service for homeless people. The volunteer-run organization feeds a weekly dinner to around 40 homeless people, has a weekend "backpack program" for school aged children that fills a backpack up with dry and nonperishable foods, and provides rent assistance payments of up to \$200 each month to low-income families.

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