

RURAL HOUSING, from page 7

Don Senecal, the organization's grant writer and former chair of the Homeless Leadership Coalition, a regional organization of homeless service providers in Central Oregon, admitted the services Jericho Table provides barely meet the need in Redmond, a town of nearly 30,000 and where hundreds of people experiencing homelessness camp.

"There isn't much we can do," he laments. "As a volunteer organization, we don't have the organizational structure."

There are growing calls for the city of Bend, a city of nearly 100,000 and which has experienced exponential growth in the last decade, to fund services to combat homelessness.

"They've got to remember that in growth comes all this other stuff and it's got to be dealt with," Terry, COVO's executive director, said.

The learning curve of why government should put dollars into homeless programs is steep. Even the concept of "housing first" is new to many in Central Oregon.

Housing first is a decades old, evidence-based practice of providing housing to a homeless person first, despite whatever barriers they may have to staying in that housing, with services attached to the housing.

The alternative, historically, has been to require people to be clean and sober, and often in a treatment program, prior to receiving housing.

The thinking in a housing first model, however, is that housing will help stabilize a person's life and health, making them more willing to access services and receptive to recovery. It's an approach adopted in cities across the country, including Portland.

"We have been working to slowly introduce that concept to the community," Molly Taroli, the co-chair of the Homeless Leadership Coalition, said. "There's been a lot of conversations happening."

At the same time, Taroli said, service providers and advocates have been focusing more on ways to broaden the services available to homeless people, including mental health and drug treatment.

"If you put someone into a home, that won't necessarily fix the problem," Taroli said.

Senecal and others agree. Many of the homeless people he works with in Redmond, he said, have "a conglomerate of challenges" from being homeless for years.

"You can't put them in a shelter overnight and say that you've taken care of the situation," said Terry, with the Central Oregon Veterans Organization. "That's not their home."

But, he said, if a system in Central Oregon were created that allowed homeless people to stay somewhere "for six months, and you're providing some wraparound services (that help with) whatever it is that got you here - it's a good thing."

The first project modeled after housing first is about to launch in Central Oregon. Created by the Central Oregon Health Council, the entity that oversees the area's Medicaid service provider, the FUSE Project will provide housing for between 25 and 30 homeless people who are frequent users of the health care and law enforcement systems.

The project is currently hiring a director and is expected to launch later this year or

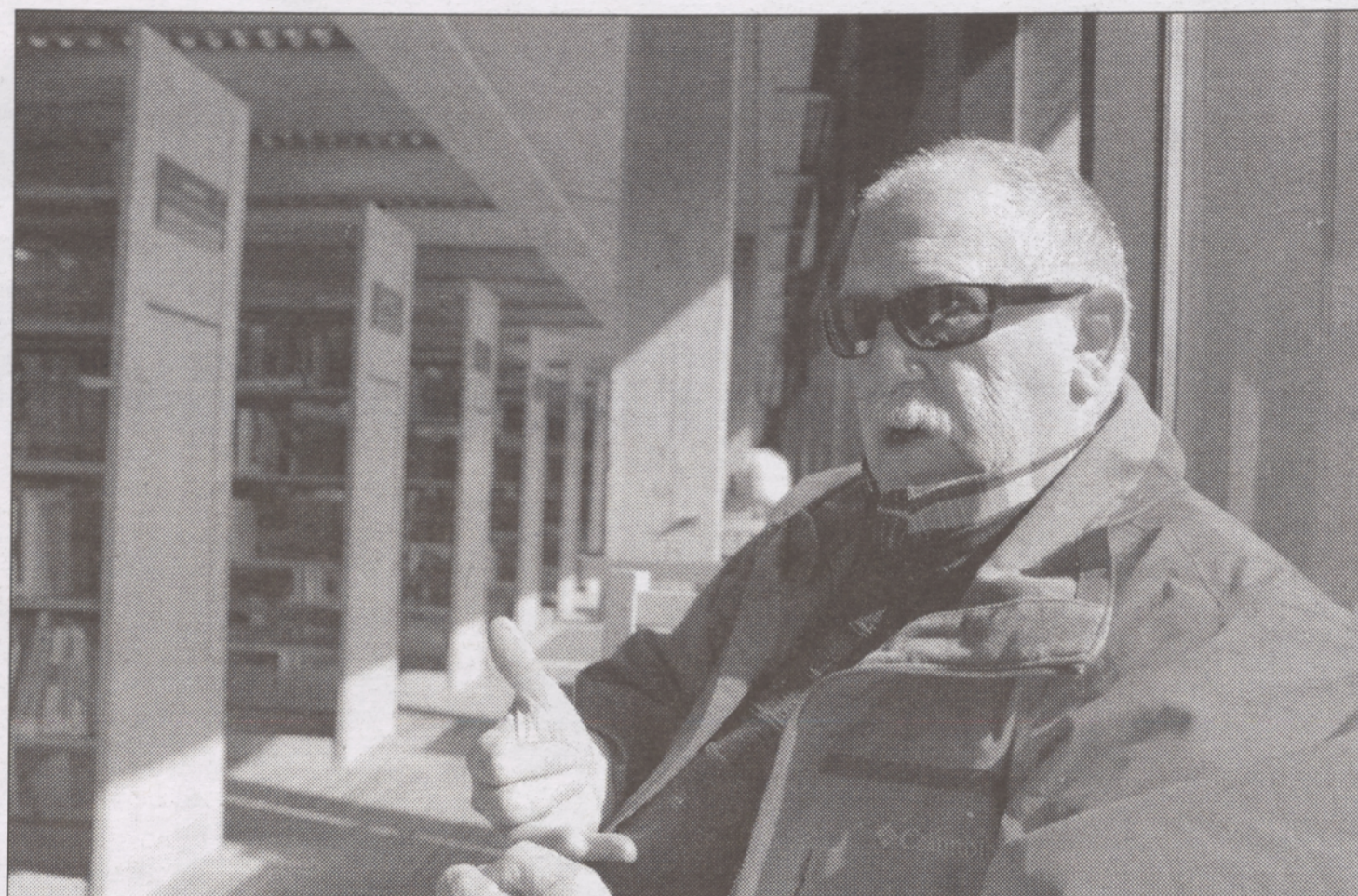


PHOTO BY AMANDA WALDRUPE

Don Senecal is the grant writer for Jericho Table, the only direct social service for homeless people in Redmond, where he said the region is trying to protect an image and hide homelessness. He's also the former chair of the Homeless Leadership Coalition, a regional organization of homeless service providers in Central Oregon,

early next with plans for expansion if successful.

Time will tell if Bend city government, or any government in Central Oregon, becomes the first governmental body in the region to dedicate dollars directly to homeless concerns.

Dave Beckett, the pastor of Bend Church, which hosts a Wednesday morning breakfast for nearly 150 homeless people, began reaching out to members of Bend's City Council after he decided that his church would not host a women's shelter last winter.

He said he has urged members of the City Council "to make (homeless funding) a priority."

"There hasn't really been any action," he said.

Senecal is critical of local government's attitude, comparing the situation to the one in the movie "Jaws," when, after the initial shark attack, the mayor refused to close the town's beach for fear of losing tourist dollars.

"It's the same mindset," Senecal said. "(Central Oregon) has an image to maintain."

"There are people in positions of authority and people in positions of financial responsibility who refuse to acknowledge the fact that this community or any community has that kind of a challenge," he continued. "They won't help."

The city of Bend does consider homelessness and creating more low-income housing one of the city's top strategic priorities in the coming years, according to the city's 2017-2019 "goals and objectives."

Brant Kucera, the city manager of Sisters, said the small city of 2,500 is not immune from rising homelessness.

"We just have no funding dedicated to homeless services," he said. "We're struggling to get our hands around the affordable housing idea."

"At some point, we're going to have to come to grips with this subject," he continued. "It's unavoidable."

In the meantime, service organizations are doing what they can to respond to the need.

Over the winter, Sally Pfeifer, the owner of the drug and alcohol counseling service Pfeifer & Associates, started a low-barrier warming shelter for nearly 30 people, housed in her offices.

She and other advocates also created the nonprofit Sagewood Sanctuary, and are among a chorus of advocates and service providers calling for the creation of a sanctioned camp in Bend, similar to Dignity Village or Right 2 Dream Too in Portland.

There has already been pushback.

"I don't see how that's going to necessarily solve our homelessness issue," Taroli said.

COVO, for the first time, is building its own housing. The city of Bend gave the organization a small, vacant lot of surplus land, with the agreement that COVO would build affordable, low-income housing.

Short on funding, COVO scaled back its project from two fourplexes to one duplex with four units of housing. The organization will maintain ownership of the remaining land and hopes to build additional units as funding becomes available. Construction is expected to start this summer.

WHILE THE CASH FLOW for homeless services is still scant, the cities in Central Oregon have taken a variety of actions to incentivize housing construction, including construction excise taxes, which tax construction permits and dedicate the revenue to affordable housing, grant system development waivers, or other measures.

In addition, Bend is revising its scoring criteria for how it awards grants from its Affordable Housing Fund, Bend's Affordable Housing Fund supports the construction of housing affordable to people who make 80 percent of the area median income or less. Since it was started in 2006, the fund has helped support the construction of 770 units.

The city of Sisters will consider adopting a 1 percent construction excise tax in the coming months.

The tax would generate, Kucera estimates, about \$187,000 a year, increasing the city's general fund by 1 percent. "It's

significant," he said.

The city of Madras, a city of 6,729 at the northern edge of Central Oregon, has created its own city-wide housing plan which it will be implementing over the next five years.

The housing plan, which Madras' city council identified as a priority last year, is being developed in collaboration with ECONorthwest, a Portland-based economic consulting firm.

Nick Snead, community development director for the city of Madras, said the plan will propose changes to the city policy, zoning and other regulations, fee structures and other factors that affect housing construction.

The housing plan will focus on ways to build all types of housing: housing affordable to low-income or formerly homeless people, workforce and middle-income housing, Snead said.

Like officials at the city of Prineville, Snead believe natural economic forces will be the biggest factor in solving the city's housing shortage, especially filtering, a process that happens when people of higher incomes move into slightly more expensive housing, thereby creating vacancies in lower-cost housing for people who make lower incomes.

"As a small, rural community, we need all types of housing to really cause the housing cycle to start," Snead said. "It doesn't mean we're ignoring low-income housing."

REGIONALLY, THE CENTRAL OREGON Intergovernmental Council is convening a "Housing for All" workgroup.

The group's mission, according to its charter draft published in March, is "to address the full spectrum of Central Oregon's housing needs - from homelessness to middle income market housing - through integrated regional effort and action."

The workgroup will have 19 members, representing state and local government, public health, law enforcement, social services, large employers, builders and traders, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

The group intends to publish a joint action plan later this year, and launch a public information campaign to raise awareness about Central Oregon's housing crisis, the role that stable housing plays as a community and economic force, and "help those that are not housing vulnerable to understand 'their enlightened self interest' in supporting housing for all."

"(We want) to help people understand why we should care and what we should do," Scott Aycock, the Intergovernmental Council's community and economic development manager, said.

Kemper is like many others when he said that the very fabric of Central Oregon's community is at stake if the unavailability of low-income housing is not quickly dealt with.

"There's a lot of affluent people who live in (Central Oregon)," Kemper said. "If you want someone to pour you coffee or pump your gas or check you out in a grocery store, you've got to have places for those people to live."