

'Our police are very interested in this. They think we ought to do it.'

— MAYOR KITTY PIERCY

A lot of other fat in the city budget could benefit the homeless. The city is spending \$16 million in reserves for new offices for the police department. The city spent \$2 million in reserves to design a new City Hall that it decided not to build. The city is giving away more than \$1 million a year away in tax breaks for high-end, university area apartment developers who critics say would build the same thing without the handout. The city has six PR people costing about \$500,000 a year.

But if the city bureaucracy won't let go of its cash for an essential human service, there's always the possibility of a tax increase. While the blue ribbon committee was calling for increased funding for street people in 2008, the city successfully campaigned for a \$36-million tax increase for street asphalt.

The blue ribbon report recommended a city education campaign and a \$5 million property tax levy on the ballot last November, but the City Council did not refer the measure.

A \$500,000-a-year levy costing the average homeowner only about \$6 a year could fund about 30 wet beds, based on other cities' costs. Piercy said if people called for such a small tax measure, the council would consider it. But she said after the failure of the school funding measure in May, she's unsure of its chances at the ballot. "People just don't know what the capacity is to say yes to things."

BUM POLITICS

In other cities the police have played a major leadership and funding role in helping wet beds happen.

But Eugene Police Chief Pete Kerns did not return several calls requesting comment for this story. Melinda McLaughlin, one of the departments' two PR people, referred questions to local nonprofits. "We are not the right sources for info on wet beds," she emailed.

But Piercy said Kerns has been supportive of wet beds in discussions with her. "Our police are very interested in this. They think we ought to do it," Piercy said. "I have heard that numerous times."

Solomon says the chief did seem "open to it" when he talked to him about wet beds this summer. Solomon said Kerns wanted to bring other people in on the discussion, and hopefully meetings will happen this fall.

Wet beds have happened in other cities when key players in city government, law enforcement and hospitals pushed for it, McDonald said. "I haven't seen these three sit down and smile and nod and say, 'Yeah, we'd like to make this happen.'"

Without action, McDonald said federal and county cuts, unemployment and dysfunctional health care are combining into a "perfect storm" for the homeless problem this year. "It's hard to watch."

But Riddle said he thinks Eugene can come together to get the wet beds idea done. "Fly it out there and see what happens," he said. "There are a lot of people out there who would like to find some solution, because they are tired of seeing people out in the bushes on their way to work."

Other cities have been doing wet beds successfully for 15 or 20 years, Riddle said. In Eugene, "I think it's an idea whose time has come."

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