

GIMME SHELTER

Advocates discuss using proposed City Hall funds to help the homeless

- Close on the heels of the news that conservative Councilor George Poling was **stepping down** from the Eugene City Council, longtime conservative Lane County Commissioner Faye Stewart announced his departure from the Board of Commissioners. Appointments for replacements will be made in April, and the replacements will probably reflect their predecessor's right-leaning values, but here's to hoping that these transitions leave some openings for electing progressives who prioritize the environment, human rights and helping those in need.

- The **Trump administration is making the Watergate scandal look like a tempest in a teapot.** How much longer can the Teflon Cheeto hold on?

- Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, former state treasurer, is **a political leader we're watching with hope.** *The Oregonian* reported recently that he led a group of mayors, mostly from the Portland area, to lobby the Legislature on help for the homeless. Wheeler's message: "Local government in America right now is the dumping ground for all of society's problems. To be honest, we're not going to take it anymore."

- **Tom Giesen's byline showed up frequently in Eugene Weekly** over the years, usually addressing the looming specter of climate change on our letters and opinion pages. His family tells us Giesen's byline will appear no more. Giesen passed away March 4. Giesen was an adjunct research associate in the University of Oregon's Public Planning, Policy and Management Department and had master's degrees in forest ecology and creative writing. Giesen's Celebration of Life will be noon-3 pm Saturday, April 15, at the McKenzie River Ec lodge in Vida. His family tells us, "We will have brownies and cheese, his favorites, and invite anyone who would like to attend to share stories of him with all of us. People are also invited to bring food to share, if they like. We may be outdoors a bit and walk down to the river so folks should dress accordingly."

- The Oregon Arts Commission this week announced **\$25,670 in grants to Eugene arts organizations.** Recipients include Lane Arts Council, \$6,000 to support Fiesta Cultural; Eugene Symphony, \$7,000 for a program to bring music to people who experience barriers to cultural participation; Eugene-Springfield Youth Orchestras, \$5,700 for its String Academy program; and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, \$6,970 for the Club de Arte para Mamás (Mothers' Art Club). About a third of the arts commission's funding comes from the National Endowment for the Arts, which President Trump's proposed budget would abolish.

- It's encouraging to see the **Home Energy Score program get attention and funding in Eugene.** The national initiative is being pursued locally by the UO Office of Sustainability and its Director Steve Mital, who is also an EWEB commissioner. Mital talked about his Home Energy Score Pilot Program Partnership at a recent monthly meeting of the Eugene Sustainability Commission. UO students have completed 93 out of 240 assessments of Eugene rental homes with the purpose of scoring energy efficiency. Portland last year adopted a Home Energy Score Policy that quantifies residential energy efficiency for buyers and sellers, and also requires disclosure to renters at time of lease. Eugene renters "are often unaware of energy costs" when they move in, Mital says. They find out later when they get their power bills. Awareness and disclosure, he says, can encourage thousands of landlords to do energy upgrades and allow potential renters to make more informed decisions. The city of Eugene provided \$10,000 toward cost of the local pilot program.

According to the city of Eugene, roughly 3,000 people in the community have no home to return to on any given night, and many others are on the brink of becoming homeless.

Yet for the past four years, the city has poured money, time and energy into designing a new City Hall that has yet to come to fruition, while the unhoused continue spending their nights on the streets.

The Eugene City Council voted in 2013 to demolish the old City Hall building citing as its reasons that it could no longer serve Eugene's growing population as well as failing to meet new building code requirements. Opponents of the teardown argued for a remodel. The council earmarked \$18 million for the new City Hall project.

The city has already spent close to \$6 million on a design it may not use and has proposed adding another \$8.7 million to the budget from a legal settlement with Comcast. If passed, the Comcast money would bring the City Hall budget to more than \$26 million, with about 20 percent of it already spent.

The City Hall project currently sits in limbo as a land swap with Lane County and deed restriction on the Park Blocks are negotiated.

The city has done some things to provide shelter for the homeless, such as investing money in the homeless car camping and rest stop pilot programs, but local homeless advocates say just a fraction of the \$26 million would go miles in terms of providing sufficient services and shelter for the community's unhoused.

Heather Sielicki, president of Southeast Neighbors, says the city should set aside the Comcast money for a public shelter. And while deliberating on plans for constructing a new City Hall, Sielicki says the city should use the empty lot to shelter the homeless in the meantime.

"It's frustrating to see the City Hall site sitting vacant when there is the capacity for us to immediately offer shelter to those who don't have it," Sielicki says. "Why can't they stay at the City Hall site? We know that's not going to get resolved anytime soon."

Councilor Emily Semple says it seems "unreasonable" to worry about building a City Hall given the "incredible needs" the city has right now, such as providing affordable housing and shelter for the homeless. She says it costs the city about \$70,000 per year to rent spaces around town in the absence of a City Hall, but says she is not convinced that using the Comcast money toward a city hall is the best use of the one-time money.

Sue Sierralupe, the clinic manager of Occupy Medical, says the city can ill afford not to have a public shelter. She says several church buildings currently for sale could be used for a shelter and would fall well within the budget of \$26 million.

Others say operating and maintaining a public shelter would be costly, recommending instead a series of smaller-scale fixes that can be implemented quickly.

Terry McDonald, executive director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society of Lane County, says he favors the expansion of programs focused

on moving people from public shelters and into housing, such as rest stops and dawn-to-dusk camping, which are far more cost-effective than traditional brick-and-mortar shelters.

McDonald also recommends putting more money into preserving mobile home parks, which cost about \$40,000 per space, and Housing First options, which place people in permanent housing quickly while also providing them with the support to keep it. St. Vincent de Paul recently purchased the Saginaw Trailer Park, just north of Cottage Grove.

Pastor Dan Bryant, executive director of SquareOne Villages, says it will take "an effort equal to that of City Hall" to fix the current shortage of shelter and affordable housing, adding that he knows this will not happen anytime soon. In the interim, Bryant says, the city could modify its camping ban to allow sleeping in designated public places and provide grants to neighborhoods willing to host their own rest stops.

EW asked city spokesperson Jan Bohman to comment on the idea of spending money on a shelter instead of a new City Hall, but did not receive a response before press time. ■



HEATHER SIELICKI

