

UNDER THE BRIDGE

Homelessness and addiction in Washington Jefferson Park

If you were dismissive, as we were, of the recent rumor that Oregon's own **Art Robinson** could be named Trump's science advisor, you might read Jane Mayer's brilliant article in the March 27 *New Yorker* on "Trump's Money Man." That's **Robert Mercer**, "a reclusive hedge fund tycoon" who rivals the Koch brothers for bankrolling extreme-right politicians. Mercer has funded Robinson in his several failed efforts to beat our **Congressman Peter DeFazio**. After reading this shocking article, it is clear that Pete needs our fierce support and Mercer's money should not sully Oregon. But it could happen — Robinson could become Trump's science advisor.

Eugene City Council may hear the public loud and clear, but that doesn't equate to listening. A March 24 *Register-Guard* story discussing enthusiastic participation during council meetings noted that 74 people gave testimony — which took two and a half hours! — at the January 23 meeting. According to the RG, the council has had to delay votes, and the longer public comment times have also postponed regular business during meetings. Considering the council's willingness to ignore public testimony on the proposed dog ban, maybe the more dissent the better. "How much is too much?" the RG asked. Maybe the council should look at preemptive ways to prepare — perhaps by bringing a snack or two. Elected officials should be happier than clams when constituents turn out to participate. Take all the time you need, people of Eugene. This is what democracy looks like.

The soap opera continues at **Eugene Opera**, where word went out March 27 that **General Director Mark Beudert** will step down June 30 after ten years running the show. Earlier this year the opera, then \$160,000 in debt, canceled the second half of its season, scratching two productions planned for this spring. Beudert, an opera tenor who teaches at the University of Notre Dame, pushed the organization to new artistic heights with such contemporary fare as *Nixon in China* and *Dead Man Walking* but didn't sell enough tickets — or draw enough grants and donations — to cover the cost of one of the most expensive art forms. Next step, insiders say: promoting music director Andrew Bisantz, the man on the podium in the orchestra pit, to artistic director.

We will take these March wins, one cosmic and the others just plain fun. The collapse of Trump/Ryan/Nobody-care is the big win. We trust it's the first in a long line of legislative disasters. Oregon basketball wins by both men and women are the fun of **March Madness**. Maybe the male Ducks will play Gonzaga for the championship. We will know more after Saturday night's games. For the young female Ducks to make it to the final eight for the first time ever was terrific! Too bad they shared a bracket with UConn, who downed the Ducks for their 111th straight win.

Beneath Eugene's Washington Jefferson Bridge, a swath of park stretches from Sixth to First avenues. On a sunny March day, every pillar is occupied — some with tarps, blankets and shopping carts, and some with makeshift shelters constructed from clothing, towels and fabrics. Most people blanket-ed below these temporary refuges are asleep at 2 pm.

"No Camping" is spray-painted in block letters high above the ground on some pillars.

A man and woman sitting at a picnic table with a friend say Washington Jefferson Park turns into "night of the living dead" after dark, and the open space has been taken over by hoodlums. They asked *Eugene Weekly* not to use their names or take their photographs to protect their safety. "It's barely safe in the daytime," the man says.

Don Gulbrandsen with ShelterCare, a local nonprofit located across from Washington Jefferson Park that works to reduce homelessness, says the 2016 Point in Time Homeless Count documented 1,451 unhoused people living in Eugene. Gulbrandsen says it's a valuable number because it provides a year-to-year tally of homelessness, making it a good tracking tool.

"By no means is it a complete count," he says of the annual homeless count. "It has certain limitations — frankly, there are a lot of people who know its coming and hide." Gulbrandsen says people also camp in dense forests and state parks throughout Lane County, which is another factor that affects the count.

And for people struggling with addiction, emergency shelter options in Eugene are limited, according to Gulbrandsen.

Gulbrandsen estimates the homeless number accounts for approximately half of Eugene's unhoused population.

Behind the black fencing at the north end of the park, scraps of tin foil and needles litter the ground. People sit around the perimeter of the basketball court and the WJ Skatepark. Two people reach into their pockets and make an exchange in the open doorway of the public bathroom. A couple of people are wearing black bandanas covering their noses and mouths.

The 23-acre park is full, though families are notably absent.

The man and woman have been camping nearby at a sanctioned camp all winter. "They lock the gate behind us at night," he says. "We know all the people in our camp."

They sleep on a platform at their camp to keep from lying on the wet ground. "If you get soaking wet on a cold night you could be in serious trouble," the man says. Their camp provides space for about 60 people. The woman says they plant vegetables at their camp, too.

On this particular Thursday, the three sit and talk while drinking sodas. Whenever they come to the park, the man and woman say, they pick up the garbage to try and keep the park clean.

"We always find drug paraphernalia and piles of needles here," the man says.

They agree that they've never seen the level of drug use in Washington Jefferson Park that they are seeing on this day. "I went to 7-Eleven and counted three people with needles in their arms," the man says. "People around here act really whack. It's the worst I've ever seen."

A man with a metal detector and tool belt is scanning patches of grass near the picnic table. He also declined to

give his name for safety reasons. "It's unfortunate that people have to live here," he says.

He lives in Santa Clara and hunts for objects in the park mostly during wintertime. He says some people could be here by choice, but others are likely struggling with addiction. "Rent is so high in Eugene," he adds.

City efforts to keep people from sleeping on dry plots under the bridge came at taxpayer expense in 2016. An estimated \$54,419 was spent on the security fencing, according to Eugene's Public Works Affairs Manager Brian Richardson.

But when people have nowhere to sleep, seeking shelter on private property near the park can be the safer and less-expensive alternative. The man and woman sitting at the picnic table say they know people who have lifetime exclusions from the park.

Scott Milovich, Eugene Parks and Open Space operations manager says that he's not aware of any current lifetime park exclusions. He says typical exclusions issued tend to range from one to three months, but an exclusion can last up to one year.

"The behavior is pretty egregious to get a park exclusion," Milovich says. Camping falls under that behavior. "Most of the time people get recommended to social services [and do] not necessarily get a park exclusion," he adds.

The Eugene Police Department issues citations for park-rule violations like camping, according to Public Information Officer John Hankemeier.

"I know a guy who got kicked out for life and 10 days," the man at the picnic table says. "What does that mean, your ghost isn't allowed in the park?"

"It's not somewhere you'd want to take your children. We understand that," he adds. "I don't

feel safe here."

Homelessness can quickly become reality for most Americans — 62 percent of people live paycheck to paycheck, according to a 2016 *MarketWatch* article.

And as people struggle to find emergency housing and shelter, the Eugene City Council has taken measures to criminalize homelessness. The council did not consult with the city's Human Rights Commission's Homelessness Workgroup before voting on the recent dog ban downtown, says Eugene's Human Rights Commission Vice-Chair Jennifer Frenzer.

"We were never, never requested to weigh in," Frenzer says. "We were circumvented."

City Councilor Alan Zelenka says he doesn't think homelessness and the dog ban are related. "There are just too many dogs downtown," he says.

Zelenka says the Human Rights Commission gave testimony during the hearings, but City Council did not consult the commission.

"They conflated the two issues and, to me, they are not the same thing, so it's really about the behavior, and we are doing a multipronged approach to addressing the bad behaviors that are occurring downtown."

The man who frequents the park with his metal detector says people tend to leave him alone. He says he heard about a veteran who froze to death this winter in Oregon. "I don't know if it will ever go away," he says of homelessness. He adds that addiction attributes to homelessness. "I go to a 12-step program; I understand where they are at." ■

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