

# OPINION

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## GUEST COLUMNS

# Winter is coming

## Let's marshal resources now to help the homeless

In a "mild" 2017/18 Astoria winter, two desperate people experiencing homelessness died of exposure.

Ronnie was an outspoken character whose bark was worse than his bite. By his own admission, he adopted an attitude (even of incivility, at times) for self-preservation. He admitted he had been roughed up by those he thought were friends and carried a pocket knife to deter others from stealing his coat, blanket, and change of underwear — again.



**BILL VAN NOSTRAND**

Ronnie was among regular Astoria Warming Center clients — during Astoria's most inclement evenings — looking for a shower, hot meal and warm bed.

The other fatality, this year in town, was known to me only as Janine. She came to the basement of the Methodist Church only on occasion, and we all wondered where she might be staying whenever we did not see her. She reportedly expired where she slept, on a park bench in front of Video Horizons.

We are not certain that anyone will miss Janine, particularly, but there are a number in town who are trying to imagine and create alternatives. And because this kind of nightmare is becoming reality, we mourn.

Recently, Helping Hands Development Director Raven Brown shared statistics with a city task force which suggest upward of 1,000 are experiencing homelessness in Clatsop County. According to surveys conducted by Clatsop Community Action — in time for annual reporting — there may be indicated "a few less." However, both Raven and CCA Executive Director Elaine Bruce agree the number is significant and alarming.

### By the numbers

So, let's use 1,000 for talking purposes. And let's also say the recent deaths, while tragic, do contain a ray of hope for this dilemma. The sooner that vagrants and transients recognize that North Coast weather is an issue which cannot easily be predicted or managed, the less likely people will be to come to the beach without resources and, unfortunately, be relegated to living on our streets.

Too harsh? Well, at least, with 30 cots at the warming center and two deaths, Clatsop County is now down to just 968 homeless.

The Astoria Rescue Mission provides an additional 30 beds for men and, perhaps, their House of Hope has nightly openings for a similar number of women. However, the rescue mission does not permit any in its shelters who have jobs, they have strict guidelines about substance use, and they require clients to participate in worship and enroll in religious instruction. In truth, all are barriers to entry into that program.

I regularly encounter folks who let me know, "(They) would not darken our door or get involved with organized religion if their life depended on it!" I imagine many people who are desperate have much the same reticence about church — even though their fragile lives, unfortunately, sometimes do.

Be that as it may, let's give the rescue mission the benefit of the doubt. For sake of argument, let's assume the best. That would bring the number experiencing homelessness in the county down to 908.

Enter Helping Hands Reentry Outreach. An exciting project, undertaken by an ambitious purveyor, with a plan to reclaim an abandoned, but historic, boarding house in Uniontown. Armed with both personal street experience and impressive street "cred" (favorable track record) assisting those who are willing to commit to their own recovery make transition from helpless to hopeful; Alan Evans Inc. is a welcome partner — not only at the solutions table, but with a promise of 60 bedroom opportunities, as well. 848.

And yet, the announcement that a number of "affordable" units at the Emerald



Illustration by Noel Thomas

**A mattress and bedding at the Astoria Warming Center, housed in the First United Methodist Church.**

Apartments will soon be upgraded and repriced "closer to what the market will bear" would seem to diminish some enthusiasm. At very least, the coincidence there may be 60 individuals or families displaced (by a hike in household rent expense, or by an inability to cope with more than a \$500 financial surprise) is disheartening. 908.

Richard Garner — a member of First Presbyterian Church — and I recently identified a distressed property on Alameda Avenue which had been taken by the county for failure to pay property tax. We asked County Manager Cameron Moore to consider, "What if ... that 6-plex had a new owner and it could be reclaimed/refurbished so as to make a temporary home for people in transition?" To which Moore revealed that Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc. had already spoken for the property and is planning something similar. Fantastic! 902.

### Reasons for optimism

Such creativity, generally, and dedication of these community energies and resources, spe-

cifically, are certainly reasons for optimism. And, in mid-July, it would seem we have time — while the sun is out and temperatures are so much like summer. After all, it has been a number of months since anyone had to think about the possibility that someone might, actually, perish in the North Coast cold and wet.

However, we do not want to wait too long to begin identifying vacant, available and/or underutilized commercial spaces in town. We do not want to wait too long to begin making our plans, developing our partnerships and/or lining up the requisite financial supports. Because for those whose daily existence depends upon the struggle to find food, facilities and overnight shelter, the mantra of a popular HBO fantasy series is all too real.

No matter how sunny and warm it is today and regardless of how long the TV meteorologists predict summer in Astoria will last: "Winter is coming."

*Bill Van Nostrand is pastor of First Presbyterian — "The Big Yellow Church" on the corner of 11th Street and Grand Avenue in Astoria.*

# West Coast cities struggling with prosperity

It's beyond laughable that a one-bedroom apartment can sell for \$1.5 million in San Francisco — and get multiple offers within a day. Or that dumpsters sport satirical "for rent" signs. Or that the asking price for a side order of Brussels sprouts at many restaurants is \$16.

Beyond laughable because such stories pass like a Bay Area breeze in the city named for a pauper from medieval Assisi.

But the latest assessment of the out-of-reach quality of one of the world's great places to live came as a real jolt:

A family of four earning \$117,000 is now classified as low income in the San Francisco area. This threshold, used to determine

eligibility for federal housing assistance, is the highest in the nation — and no surprise.

Once upon a time in the American West, the most exclusive places — Sun Valley, Aspen, Lake Tahoe, the San Juan Islands in Washington state — were known as "Golden Ghettos," an imperfect term used by trendy demographers.

But now the entire West Coast, from San Diego to Vancouver, British Columbia, is a string of gilded megalopolises. These are the tomorrow cities, the tech cities, the cities of the young and educated. And each of them is struggling with a prosperity crisis that threatens the very nature of living there.

A New Yorker would say, so what, get used to paying through the nose to live in a tiny space on limited land — Manhattan, Brooklyn and now Queens have seen it all. But people on the West Coast, perhaps naively, are not ready to say, "Fuhgeddaboutit." Not yet. With varying degrees of success, they are fighting for the soul of their cities.

Residents of San Francisco are troubled by the same things that we are in my hometown, Seattle — the homeless and the high cost of living. The issues are linked, but not entirely.

"Walking the streets of San Francisco can be a frightening, demoralizing, even unhealthy experience for residents and tourists alike." This comment came not from the medical association that just pulled its convention because its members no longer feel safe in a city of 7,500 homeless. It came from the woman just elected mayor of San Francisco, London Breed.

Raised in poverty, and the first African-American chosen to lead the city, Breed has vowed to remove homeless encampments within a year. There is nothing compassion-



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

**Large spheres take shape in front of an Amazon building as new construction continues across the street in Seattle.**

ate or financially sound in spending \$250 million a year on homeless services that still leaves thousands sleeping on the street.

In order to do the other thing that Breed wants to do, build more housing of all kinds, she has to secure the social contract. That is: Can people accept more crowded neighborhoods, in a city that is already the second most densely populated among big cities in the nation, if they feel that elected leaders do not have a decent plan — or a clue?

As Breed notes, San Francisco has created only one home for every eight new jobs between 2010 and 2015. She may not be ready to utter a hard truth that some residents already have: that not everyone who wants to live there can.

In Seattle, the nation's fastest-growing city for this decade, the social contract is nearly broken. The city used to be run by creative problem solvers. Now, an ideologically driven City Council dreams up new

things to anger residents while seeming to let the homeless have the run of the place.

The latest backward move was a tax on jobs — quickly repealed after a citizens' revolt. While the council was trying to target Amazon, the city's biggest private employer, the tax would have also hurt grocery stores and family-run businesses, as if they caused the homeless crisis and spike in real estate.

An urban alliance of socialists and developers threatens to destroy the city's single-family neighborhoods with a major upzoning — further disrupting trust between residents and politicians. If the intent is to make Seattle more affordable, this approach has failed. The city has built more new units of housing over the last five years than in the prior half-century. And yet Seattle continues to lead the nation in home price increases.

Vancouver has taxed speculation, hitting

foreign buyers and those who own homes that sit empty. Prices have stabilized somewhat. But the globalization of the housing market is a problem more particular to British Columbia.

No matter what you hear anecdotally, people will continue to move to the West Coast. The city of St. Francis has seen far worse than the present crisis. More than half the population was homeless after the 1906 earthquake. But by midcentury, it was *The American* city, birthplace of the United Nations.

We need a new urbanism. For all the grumping about how great the cities facing the Pacific used to be, they can be greater still if the bright minds now trying to "disrupt" a grilled cheese sandwich can focus on the biggest challenge of this generation. We know what doesn't work. The task is to find a creative mix of solutions that do.

*Timothy Egan is a syndicated columnist for the New York Times News Service.*