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First Step, which consists of a board of pastors, social workers, educators, grant writers and corporate managers, listed a number of partners in achieving successful outcomes for their clients, including Goodwill Job Connections, Oregon Department of Human Services, Lane Community College, Catholic Charities of Lane County, St. Vincent De-

Paul and Habitat for Humanity's home buyer classes.

Program participants will go through a background check and will be required to pay a monthly contribution to the First Step program, or else do work "in kind."

"This program is not a free program," Lenox told the Siuslaw News. "I don't like to say that a lot of organizations are Band-Aids, but they are. And I support a lot

of them. Band-Aids are great, but that doesn't solve the problem to get a family a person to self-sufficiency. That's what we're going to try to do."

Once in the program, participants will be subject to strict rules while living in transitional housing. This will include no theft, no violence to oneself or others, no alcohol, marijuana, illegal drugs or drug paraphernalia and no persistent disruptive behavior. Quiet hours will be enforced between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., no overnight visitors will be allowed and children playing outside the homes will require adult supervision.

The participants will live in one of three trailer units that will be temporarily placed on land owned and occupied by the Presbyterian Church, located at 3996 Highway 101.

As of now, First Step is merely a pilot program, using the next year as proof of concept, though it's possible it may ask for a three- to six-month extension. After that period, the program will look to expand to six to 10 homes, depending on the need that is found.

"But it won't be at the church because it isn't an appropriate place for it," said Greg Wood, Pastor of the Presbyterian Church and board member of First Step. "It would be somewhere on the edge of town, in the urban growth boundary, or perhaps in the county. It would need to be on a bigger piece of property on a little bit more security and with the opportunity to put in permanent infrastructure."

At issue at the Planning Commission was whether or not the city would allow the group to install three mobile units, and First Step was tasked with answering safety and construction issues related to the project.

Sewer, water and electrical lines would be run underground, connecting to the already existing facilities used by the church, and trash receptacles would be barred to discourage foraging by wild animals.

Safety concerns, particularly involving the wooded area next

to the lot, were also addressed.

"I realize those woods have been a haven for people camping," Wood said. "We have been more aggressively, in the last two or three months as a congregation, encouraging people to get out of there and move on. We would feel that having people there 24 hours a day would discourage that. Because they will be there, and they will say, 'No, you can't camp here,' along with the rest of the staff and the church volunteers."

Planning Commissioner Brian Jagoe brought up concerns regarding evictions regarding unruly tenants.

"I think personally, the program is great," he said. "My concern is that people will go through the process, but if the wrong [type of person] gets in, is there a process for getting them out in an expedited manner, without causing your program to fail because of one person?"

Wood answered, "If I entered the program with a substance abuse issue, which I don't have by the way, and would not follow the rules, there's no problem with the director saying they are out of compliance. 'You have 36 hours to follow the rules or you have to leave.'"

Commissioner Michael Titmus also questioned where children in the facility would be allowed to play outside.

"We may have to designate some part of the parking lot for that," Wood said. "Our parking lot is open on Highway 101. We're hopeful that can be a safe area. Between the First Step site and the church building, there is also a green space area of grass that is mowed right up until the time it turns brown. We currently have children in the parking lot from time to time who skateboard. It does say that children have to be supervised when outside of their units."

Written public comments submitted to the commission were overwhelming positive, with 76

emails supporting it in the affirmative, two neutral and only one testimony written in the negative, citing concerns over security, vandalism and sanitation.

to look at what we want to be as a community. What's Florence going to be?"

First Step contends that it will focus on community members

"Maybe this will light a fire. Spark an interest in others who think, 'You know what, this might work.' Housing is in a crisis, and it's everywhere. We know we're not going to solve it, but we're giving it a big, big shot."

— First Step board member Kathryn Lenox

"Stability is an important component of successful life, and it pays off to have a place to call home and a place to clean-up and rest your mind," said First Step proponent Ivy Medow during the meeting's public comments. "A place to get out of the rain and plan what you're going to wear the next day, and prepare meals for your kids and friends. It pays off in ways that are immeasurable and difficult to imagine for those of us who have been lucky enough to rarely, if ever, have to sleep under a car or a bridge. It's hard for us to even imagine, I think."

"I'm totally in favor of this project. It's a way for the community to grow in a good direction."

While the majority of the audience in attendance at the meeting were in favor of the project, a few individuals expressed skepticism around the ultimate impact it would have in the community.

"The reality is that we have a whole group of people that come from the south up north during beautiful weather, and they go back south during the winter time," one person said. "Unfortunately, a lot of these people get caught in between. I've lived in some of these places, and I've seen the ugliness that takes place. If we open our door and our hearts and do the right thing — and this looks like a great thing to do — you can open that door and have Pandora's Box open. You become a beacon for everyone who wants to come here and get something. We've got so many people on the street corner with signs and accosting people for things like gasoline, food and a job. If we open that door, we have

who need a step up.

"It will not be folks that live on church property in a trailer who will go out and panhandle," Wood said. "That will not be part of the program, and if it is, they will be evicted from the program and lose the incidental benefit of living in one of the First Step temporary houses."

Ultimately, First Step representatives hope that within the first year of the program, the true scope of the project will be realized and that it will pave a path for like-minded organizations to help the issue of home ability.

"We don't know how this is going to play out," Lenox told the Siuslaw News. "We're going to review it quarterly. We may have to extend it and go before the commission if that happens. But if other pastors are doing something along these lines as well, who knows. Maybe this will light a fire. Spark an interest in others who think, 'You know what, this might work.' Housing is in a crisis, and it's everywhere. We know we're not going to solve it, but we're giving it a big, big shot."

Editor's Note: Solutions to the housing issue are being addressed by multiple agencies in Oregon, including Lane County and the City of Florence. Neighborhood Economic Development Corporation (NEDCO) is seeking to establish an affordable housing project at 1424 Airport Road in Florence. There will be an information session on Tuesday, Sept. 18, from 5:30 to 7 p.m. at the Siuslaw Public Library, 1460 Ninth St., to introduce the community and potential buyers to the project and to talk about next steps.

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