

DIFFICULTIES from page 8A

Camping and codes

Wood did have another theory about the possible decline.

“I think they migrated to Eugene,” he said. “There seems to be more resources in Eugene. I don’t really know. Some are going up and down the coast. I think from talking to folks, it’s getting harder for people to be homeless here in Florence.”

Some of that feeling may have to do with a code that was passed last year which in the public created a stir, but in practice has done very little.

In September 2018, the Florence City Council unanimously passed a code that amended nuisance laws in the city.

The original code, drafted in 1977, read, “No person shall lodge in a car, outbuilding or other place not intended for that purpose.” However, tents and RVs are intended for the purpose of lodging, therefore were not considered illegal.

Two years ago, the Florence Municipal Court judge identified the problem with the tent definition, “So, our code enforcement and police officers hadn’t handed out any of those citations all during that time,” Pitcher said.

They were working on a new draft covering both public and private lands, but then just weeks before they were to submit it to the city council, such laws were blocked by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. The court ruled that prosecuting homeless people for sleeping on public property when they have no access to shelter violated the constitution and was deemed cruel and unusual punishment.

“That had to change the city ordinance completely,” Pitcher said. “We took out the public part entirely, and it was just about private property.”

The result of the ever-evolving legal status, Pitcher stated, is that Florence Police haven’t issued an unlawful lodging citation in years.

“Now, we do address other issues that might be happening, littering and those type of things,” he said. “If we see a problem or we get complaints, we address them. We’re not citing anyone for lodging, but we will cite for other things if it’s called for.”

And guests at the shelter said they try to avoid camping on private property. While they found

it difficult sometimes knowing where public and private lands end, they tried to avoid the private property because not only could it incur a camping fine, but trespassing violations as well.

Are the police more aggressive with public fines?

“I wouldn’t say we’ve been ramping up on that,” Pitcher said. “If there’s an issue we need to address, we do. That’s been our stance for quite some time.”

The local department does receive multiple monthly calls for “illegal camping/lodging,” but some of the issues can be taken care of with a simple conversation.

“If we go somewhere where someone isn’t doing anything wrong, nothing illegal or violation of city ordinances, then we don’t do anything,” Pitcher said. “It matters what they’re doing. If it’s a matter of city ordinance, then they get citations. If it’s a criminal offense, then they could get arrested or give citations. It matters what the situation is. If it’s something we can handle and not have to take them to jail and it won’t happen again, then we’re not going to take them to jail.”

The guests at the shelter did not talk of any crackdown or aggressive ticketing either, stating that the Florence Police could be strict, but also fair and deserving of respect.

Wood believes that there could be other factors in encouraging the homeless population to leave.

“I think the businesses are pushing people away,” he said, referencing a specific business that he heard had banned multiple individuals.

“The only thing I can talk about is that we have a no loitering policy at the front of our store,” a representative told the Siuslaw News.

“And rightly so,” Wood said, acknowledging that some public problems do occur. “I have some sympathy for that.”

But Wood also pointed out that while there is a large swell of support for the homeless in the community, there are also a fair share of vocal detractors that may have left the population feeling unwelcomed and forced out.

“People may have seen the writing on the wall and moved on,” he said.



Cold Weather Resources in the Siuslaw Region

Contact the organizations above for times and additional information.

Florence Cold Weather Shelter
541-991-8208 | 3996 Highway 101

Florence Food Share
541-997-9110 | 2190 Spruce St.
florencefoodshare.org

Helping Hands Coalition
helpinghandsflorence.org
2100 Spruce St.

Mapleton Food Share
541-268-2715 | 10718 Highway 126
mapletonfoodshare.org

Siuslaw Outreach Services
541-997-2816 | 1576 12th St.
florencesos.org

Debate

The debate over the place of homeless people in the Siuslaw region has been raging for decades, with strong opinions on both sides of the issue.

Last week, the Siuslaw News printed a two-part series on interviews with the homeless, posting a link on Facebook. Denise Weatherwax-Ebner wrote the following on our Facebook page:

“Thank you for doing this. There are so many people in this town who look down upon the homeless. Like they are dirty or beneath the rest of us. Both of my grandmothers where considered ‘lower class’ by each of their husbands’ (my grandfathers) families. Growing up, they both drilled into my head that no one is BETTER than anyone else in this world. ‘There, but for the grace of God, go I.’ (sic)”

The majority of the comments posted on Facebook shared the similar sentiments. On the Let’s Talk, Florence Oregon Facebook page, Melanie McKinzie Petersen didn’t disagree with Weatherwax-Ebner’s statements, but did offer some concerns.

“My neighbor would have had help from other neighbors. We have a great town. We have a wonderful police department and first responders. We also are supporting transients in one way or the other. Let them be transients. Give our police department a break. They have to spend way too much time on many of the same people over and over. Let them move on to where there are facilities for them and larger agencies for them. Your neighbors are being robbed, your child’s bike may have been stolen. Our agencies are maxed out. Please do not give them cash. Do not allow the transients make the mistake of thinking this is a safe haven. I cannot afford to support them. Please help the truly homeless, there are felons and misdemeanors hiding here as well. Just be careful. (sic)”

In September, the city released information on the cost of clean-up of illegal camping. The annual expenses for these incidents totaled \$10,650 for Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue and \$19,500 for Western Lane Ambulance District. For Florence Code Enforcement and the Florence Police Department, expenses have ranged from \$50 to \$400 per call-out and as much as \$4,997 per site cleanup for Florence Public Works.

That’s a problem that even some of the guests of the Cold Weather Shelter saw.

“If you pack it in, you pack it out,” a guest named Hobbit said. “You mean to tell me that you can carry a 12-pack of beer and some hamburgers out there, and you can’t bring them cans and trash back? Please.”

“And you’re conscientious. I am too,” James, another guest at the shelter said. “A lot of people aren’t, and that’s what people have a problem with.”

As for the time the police department invests in the population, Pitcher said, “There’s definitely some calls with homeless people that create a lot of time for us. There’s a portion of that population that is a criminal element. Not all, but there’s a portion. That portion definitely takes up a lot of time.”

He listed drugs, alcohol, trespassing and vandalism as fre-

quent issues, most of which are misdemeanors, which limits what the police can do to prevent problems.

“If it’s staying at the misdemeanor level, which the majority of the crimes are, they’re not going to see prison,” he said. “They’re going to see jail time here, but not prison. We don’t see felonies being repeated over and over again. It’s the misdemeanors that are getting repeated over and over again.”

Pitcher said that it’s easy to see why a minority of homeless individuals can give the impression that the entire population is dangerous.

“When you’re in law enforcement, and you go through a lot of calls, you start to wonder if it’s everybody, but it’s not,” he said. “We’re dealing with the same few people over and over again. It comes down to individuals. It doesn’t matter if they’re homeless or not. If you have a certain population, whether it’s bikers, homeless or whatever, if you have a group in that population that are causing problems, those are the people that you worry about. Most people who ride bikes are good people. But there’s one percent that’s not. Those are the people that cause most of the issues. With the homeless population, the ones who are involved in the criminal element do present something to worry about. But the other part of the population, they’re not causing problems.”

While the majority of the homeless do not cause severe problems in the community, some believe that merely having homeless in the community is a blight. The general public may be supportive of those who lost housing due to current housing problems and are just trying to get by, the more chronic homeless are continually looked on with fear — such as the travelers on Highway 101 and those who come from Eugene looking for a more temperate climate.

“We don’t want to become another Eugene” is a common refrain when it comes to the homeless population, and it’s one many of the homeless themselves don’t want.

“Scary place,” James said when talking about Eugene. “There’s all the same problems as there is everywhere, there’s homelessness and crime. And you don’t know anybody. You

don’t know your way around and that kind of thing. You don’t have any money, and you don’t know anybody. And you’re lost, you know? You don’t know what your next turn is going to be. It can be an adventure, I guess, if you have that kind of spirit. But me, it scares me. You’re homeless, jobless and penniless.”

The guests, one of which had been in Florence for 10 years, wanted exactly what many of the local residents do — A quiet place they feel comfortable in. They may not have a shelter, but they still call Florence home.

The future

While the numbers may be smaller at the Cold Weather Shelter, “The need is still there,” SOS’s Teter said. “It’s definitely supplying an emergency need in the community. The last thing we need is for people to get frostbite, or even death. Hypothermia is an issue here because it’s wet.”

Wood would like to see services expanded in the region. If given the chance, he would want the shelter to be open any time it’s under 40 degrees, but the program lacks resources to handle that at this time. To expand to that temperature, a new structure would have to be found, along with funding and more support from local volunteers.

But Wood also would like to see more comprehensive solutions as well.

“I would love to see someplace that would serve as a day shelter, but also as a drop-in center that would also get people to find work,” he said.

But such plans may involve a broader discussion in the community. Does the region want to become a safe place for the homeless, embracing its place on the Highway 101 corridor? Or is that even needed? If the population is in fact decreasing for whatever reason, perhaps the goal should be to continue what’s being done. The question then is, what are we aiming for? Zero homelessness in the region? If not, who gets to stay, who gets to go, and who decides?

Basically, what’s the answer to homelessness?

“I wish I had the answer to that,” Pitcher said. “A lot of places are dealing with the problems surrounding homelessness. I just don’t have that answer. I don’t know.”

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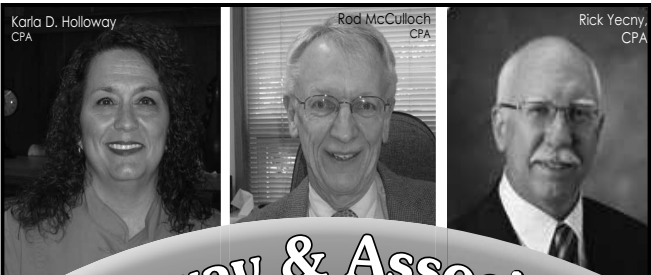
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