

SHELTER from page 1A

The main drawback was that it wouldn't have heat, light or electricity.

About that time, FECWS executive director and past president Pastor Greg Wood was in contact with Florence City Manager Erin Reynolds, who in turn was in contact with Lane County. Ultimately, Lane County had received funds for COVID-19 and the 2020 wildfire season, and had purchased 120 Pallet-brand shelters from Pallet, a company based in Everett and Seattle, Wash.

These 8-by-8-by-8-foot cubes are "aluminum, fire resistant and easily sanitized," Burke said. "And as long as you have electricity, they have heat and light. There's also a bed that comes with a mattress and some shelves."

Since the FECWS only opens on nights where Florence's temperature is freezing, having a ready-made option to provide a heated night's sleep to the shelter's guests was paramount.

"It was really exciting when Lane County said, 'Yeah, we'll loan you 20 of these,'" Burke said. "We've got a solution and it's not only a solution, but it's got heat and light included. That to me is just wonderful. And it really is acknowledging that Lane County doesn't stop over in Veneta. The coast is Lane County, too."

Taking only about 30 minutes to set up, the insulated Pallet shelters can be snapped together on site and include amenities such as electrical

connections, heat, windows, beds, mattress and a door which locks from the inside. The units can also be easily un-assembled and stored on a pallet when not in use.

Burke emphasized that the Pallet shelters belong to the county and are part of the Siuslaw Region's temporary plan. Lane County has indicated that more of its shelters need placement. Meanwhile, places like Cottage Grove have purchased their own supply.

The option for powered units led to another challenge for FECWS. Its former site at the Presbyterian Church did not have enough electric capacity to provide for the shelters.

"You need 400 amps in order to do 20 shelters," Burke explained.

The FECWS board began to ask where they could situate 20 of the 8-by-8 shelters, along with restrooms, wash stations and the other components to make a shelter site feasible.

Wood presented a solution. As president of First Step Florence, a transitional housing program that provides a way for people to access a stable living situation, he offered the use of land the 501(c)3 had purchased between Spruce Street and Highway 101 near Sand Ranch.

"Right now, it's just trees and brush. So we said, 'OK, why don't we put our shelters out on First Step Florence's property? Because there's an electric box there,'" Burke said. "So Central

Lincoln came out and told us what we need to do."

The property could support the shelters but would need vegetation clearing. Notice went up in the neighborhood on Nov. 5 of the potential work.

This matter was discussed at the Florence City Council meeting on Nov. 16, when the four seated members of the council voted to approve the temporary FECWS site location request. (Read more in the "TITLE" article in today's edition of the Siuslaw News.)

"When I heard about this,

"Even if you're just one part of the solution, you're a part. You know, I can't fix the world, but I can do this. I can do this with a whole bunch of other people."

— Florence Emergency Cold Weather Shelter President Patricia Burke

I thought my heart was going to burst," Burke said. "It was as though all this stuff was just falling into place that said, 'We're going to be able to do this.'"

The plan is to clear brush from the site, lay a gravel access road, add fencing and then install the 20 shelters, a 10-by-10-foot office space, two restrooms, two wash stations and a 12-by-12-foot canopy. The whole site will be contained within 60 feet by 100 feet and have gated access.

"All of this is very temporary, because this is not something that's permanent at all," Burke said. "We are loaned these by Lane County."

In addition, she emphasized the privacy of the site.

"It will be private, it will be gated and it will be supervised at all times," she added.

Burke again stated that this is temporary for FECWS, and that people would only be using the site when the temperature dips to 32 degrees or below. The most the shelter has been open in one year was 23 days.

"But those were 23 days when people could have fro-

zen to death," Burke said. "I just can't bear the idea that that would happen."

Each day the shelter plans to open, FECWS flies little white flags containing the image of a person sleeping under a shelter. These are located around town, but especially at Siuslaw Public Library, Safeway and Fred Meyer.

"We're not going to be able to pick people up simply because of COVID," Burke said, lamenting the loss of transportation to the site.

However, Rhody Express

is still operating. Burke said if people need a ride to the shelter site, they will be able to ride the Rhody Express to Fred Meyer and walk from there.

Once people arrive at the FECWS site, volunteers at the intake office will check them in.

"We have very, very stringent rules about how you can stay with us," Burke said. "There'll be the same rules that were there when we were in the Presbyterian Church — plus our COVID protocols."

These include questions about health and checking temperatures, as well as the standard policy on drugs and alcohol. In addition, once people check into the shelter, they cannot leave and come back.

"It's just for the safety of everyone," Burke said.

Then, people will get assigned to a Pallet Shelter and be able to drop off their belongings and get out of the cold.

"There's really a lot of space inside," Burke said.

The units are essentially for single people, though they can accommodate more, just not during COVID-19.

If families come to the shelter, FECWS has an arrangement with Siuslaw Outreach Services to house them in a motel room for the night.

All guests will also receive a boxed hot meal from FECWS volunteers, as well as tokens for warm showers.

"Being at the Presbyterian Church was wonderful, simply

because we could take care of people," Burke said. "But allowing people the privacy of their own space is 100 times better. Even if it's just for one or two nights, it's something to build on."

The strong relationship between FECWS and the Presbyterian Church continues, as the church has promised the use of its kitchen for the warm meals the shelter provides. Currently, that is both breakfast and dinner.

The shelter accepts donations of baked goods, cooked meals for 20 or more people, fruit, and bagged chips, granola bars and other snacks. To coordinate meals or to volunteer, people can contact FECWS Volunteer Coordinator Meris Robison.

"We have probably about 100 volunteers, and many of them are active in the community in other ways," Burke said.

After each night at the shelter, FECWS volunteers will be cleaning the units and washing loads of laundry.

While the shelter has plenty of sheets, it could always use more blankets and socks, since FECWS often sends guests away with materials to stay warm.

On days when the shelter will be open for consecutive nights, people will be able to leave their belongings locked in the shelters, though they will still have to leave for the day.

One thing the shelter cannot do is provide mental health or addiction services, though Burke hopes that more of those services will come to the area. She has already heard of a mobile dental unit that wants to connect with FECWS. Those services will come later as the community connects with FECWS and its mission.

As seen at the Nov. 16 city council meeting, however, thoughts are still divided.

"There is a fear, I think for people who don't look like us or don't act like us or whatever," Burke said. "But the way to solve that is, get them under shelter and give them the services that are needed. Then, if they're willing, they become members of our society, which they already are."

She said that 20 to 25 percent of the guests at FECWS are working members of soci-

ety. Some spend most nights in their cars. Still others are collecting Social Security, but it is not enough to cover their needs.

"They can't find anything that they can afford, even if they could find something that was available," Burke said about local housing. "The rental and housing situations here are just dismal."

"We have people who camp and people who tent camp, and you might not know it, but they're bagging your groceries. It's a range of people that we're serving, and the least we can do is provide them a safe shelter," she said.

It's part of a network of basic human needs that Burke wants to see met in the community.

"It's going to benefit the whole community because it's kind and it's compassionate," she said. "Hopefully, some of the people who've been so negative about the unsheltered folks will take the opportunity to maybe come to breakfast or come and serve dinner. You'll find out that these men and women are not the boogey-man."

FECWS also has positive support, which can be seen in both its 100 volunteers as well as in the funds it has been able to raise.

"We've been fortunate to have some very generous donors, but we need more money because this is going to be \$25- to \$30,000," Burke said.

That will include work on prepping the site for the temporary shelter.

However, according to the staff report on Nov. 16, "The proposed partnership between the City of Florence, FECWS, and Lane County will provide resources including Pallet shelters with a value of over \$100,000 for the Florence area during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic emergency."

"Even if you're just one part of the solution, you're a part," Burke said. "You know, I can't fix the world, but I can do this. I can do this with a whole bunch of other people."

The FECWS board includes Burke as president, Haydel as vice president, Treasurer Paul Hirsch, Secretary Judith Preisler and Wood as ex officio.

Burke said she plans to expand the board as time goes on.

"The more people who have veto and decision power, the more information and sharing comes through. The smaller the group, the fewer the ideas," she said.

While the site is temporary, FECWS is not.

"When it comes down to us, all of us are human," Burke stated. "We all have a responsibility to each other, as far as I'm concerned. My big thing is, let's see if we can take care of people and give them dignity and respect."

For more information about the Florence Emergency Cold Weather Shelter, visit facebook.com/FECWS. To make a tax-deductible donation to the shelter, send funds to PO Box 659, Florence, Ore. 97439.

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