

Hermiston council bans shelters near parks

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

An ordinance passed unanimously by the Hermiston City Council on Monday, Sept. 14, would preclude the location for a proposed homeless shelter in Hermiston.

The ordinance allows for temporary emergency housing, such as homeless shelters or camps for people who have been evacuated from a natural disaster, as a conditional use in industrial zones. But a rule in the ordinance states that such shelters must be at least 1,000 feet from schools and parks.

A group of Hermiston residents formed a nonprofit called Stepping Stones in early 2020, and in April, presented a plan to the council to create a homeless shelter using 6 foot by 10 foot Conestoga huts placed on a 0.8-acre lot behind the Agape House food bank on Harper Road — less than 1,000 feet from Theater Sports Park.

The huts would have no running water or electricity, but would have access to a community building with restrooms, showers and a gathering space. Residents would only be allowed on-site in the evenings after being checked in by security, and would have to earn credits through volunteering, work or education in order to continue living at the site.

Stepping Stones at the time asked the city to consider contributing \$85,000 toward the cost of building the huts and \$40,000 annually toward security and other operating costs for the site. City councilors in April said they felt the financial ask was too high and not enough details had been worked out, but they voted to direct the planning commission to come up with an ordinance that would at least allow that type of temporary emergency shelter inside city limits.

City planner Clint Spencer told the council on Sept. 14 that after hearing input from residents concerned that having a homeless shelter near a park would cause problems with loitering, harassment and drug paraphernalia at the park, the planning com-



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

A fenced lot between the Agape House and the Theater Sports Park was the proposed site of the Stepping Stones project.

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Byron Smith, Hermiston city manager

mission decided to include the provision about shelters being 1,000 feet from parks and K-12 schools.

Based on other feedback from the community, they also included a list of other requirements. A few of those included requiring camps to have a community building with restrooms and showers; requiring the site to be covered by a sight-obscuring fence at least 6 feet high; requiring applicants for a permit to submit a business plan and security plan; limiting residency for any occupant to 18 months; and requiring shelters to be co-located on a site with another existing industrial use already in place.

“This has changed quite a bit from when you looked at it during a work session in June,” Spencer said.

He noted the ordinance merely allows for emergency shelters to exist in industrial zones, and

is not tied to approval of Stepping Stones or any other specific projects.

Mayor David Drotzmann said when looking at a map of where the ordinance would allow a shelter, there were “not a lot of options” left — mostly some lots along Elm Avenue or South Highway 395 near Denny’s, if organizers are able to find an existing industrial user willing to allow them to co-locate on their property.

“I understand (the planning commission’s) feedback and their long deliberation that they’ve taken along with all the public input; I just hope that we haven’t handcuffed them so much that it’s made unreasonable,” Drotzmann said.

The Stepping Stones board has already made some improvements to the Agape House site, including leveling and the addition of a fence, but city manager Byron Smith said the Step-

ping Stones board had expressed to him that they didn’t want their project to trip up the city’s efforts to create rules for shelters.

“They’re trying to separate the issue and often it has been clouded,” Smith said. “This whole discussion tonight is about amending the zoning code to allow (emergency shelter projects) to happen, and I think it really got twisted up in their proposal to go on a certain location, and so I think they felt like they wanted to try and let the community discuss this, and then they will come forward with a proposal if they can find a site that’s workable.”

On Sept. 14, the council also accepted the resignation of councilor Doug Smith, who has represented Ward IV on the council for just under six years.

The city manager stated Smith had submitted a letter on Sept. 4 stating he was resigning effective Sept. 5 for “personal reasons.”

Because Smith still has more than two years left in his four-year term, the city’s charter states the city must hold a special election to fill his seat. The council can choose whether to appoint someone to fill the seat in the interim, or leave it vacant until after the election.

City manager Smith told the council that according to the city’s bylaws and election rules, that election will be held on March 9, 2021.

The council has four at-large positions and four ward positions, and the at-large positions are up for election on Nov. 3. He noted that two of the five candidates running for those four seats — current city councilor David McCarthy and newcomer Nancy Peterson — live in Ward IV and would be eligible to run for Doug Smith’s seat.

City councilor Roy Barron stated he thought it made the most sense to wait to appoint an interim councilor until after the Nov. 3 election so that if McCarthy or Peterson lost the election and wanted to apply, they could. Other councilors agreed, and the council voted to appoint an interim councilor after Nov. 3 to fill the seat until the special election in March.

New school will be called Loma Vista Elementary

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston School District’s new elementary school, planned for Theater Lane, will be known as Loma Vista Elementary School.

The school board approved the new name during their Monday, Sept. 14, meeting.

Loma Vista is a Spanish phrase that translates into “Hill View” in English. The board had previously supported using a Spanish name for the new school to reflect the school district’s demographics, where more than half the students are Hispanic. The name also reflects the desire voiced by 60% of respondents to a previous survey, stating that they wanted to see the school named for a geographical feature instead of a person, in keeping with all the other elementary schools in the district.

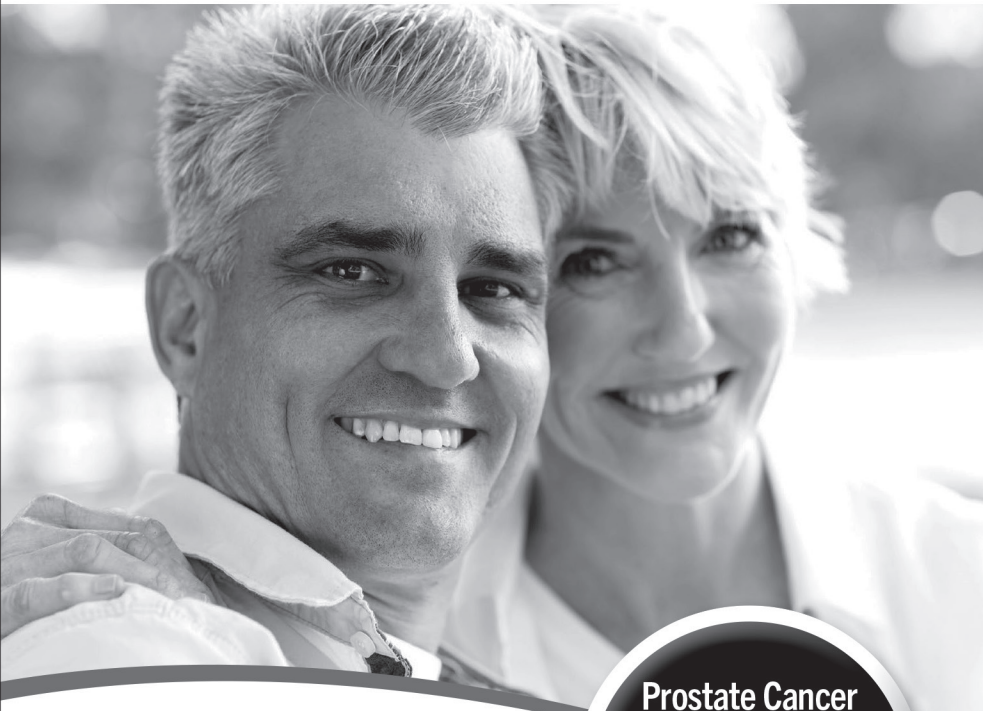
The other two names the board had previously considered were Artemisa Elementary School and La Senda Elementary School.

After gathering initial feedback and narrowing down suggestions to three choices, the district sent out a second survey on Aug. 12. According to a news release from the district, there were almost 600 responses to that survey, and Loma Vista was the “clear leader.”

Construction of the new elementary school on East Theater Lane is expected to begin in spring 2021.

During the Sept. 14 meeting, the district also awarded the bid for its new softball fields to Nelson Construction. The district is building the new fields behind Hermiston High School on the old fairgrounds, in preparation for a new version of Rocky Heights Elementary School to be built where the current softball fields stand adjacent to the elementary school.

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