

Hermiston council, candidates discuss homelessness

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Hermiston’s new ordinance regulating temporary emergency shelters was back on the agenda during the Hermiston City Council’s Oct. 12 meeting, but ultimately councilors decided to leave the ordinance the same.

The council had previously passed an ordinance on Sept. 14 that allowed homeless shelters as a conditional use on industrial land. But regulations in the ordinance, including a rule that the shelters must be 1,000 feet from schools and parks and a rule that they must be co-located on a site with an existing industrial use, ruled out the property behind the Agape House where a local non-profit known as Stepping Stones had planned to build a shelter.

After the Stepping Stones board announced they didn’t see any viable locations for their project inside city limits, Councilor Roy Barron asked that city staff draw up new maps showing what land would be available if the 1,000-foot rule were changed to 750 feet or 500 feet.

“I just don’t feel like they had a fair shake,” Barron said of the Stepping Stones group.

Even though he voted along with the rest of the council to approve the ordinance originally, during the Oct. 12 meeting he said he understood the buffer zone around schools, but the buffer around parks didn’t make sense to him, because homeless residents are already sleeping and loitering in parks now.

“People are still going to be in the parks because they have no other place,” he said.

When City Planner Clint Spencer showed the council the maps of what a 500-foot or 750-foot rule would look like, however, councilors felt a change wouldn’t make enough of a difference to make it worth going through the entire planning commission and public hearing process again.

“There would be very little benefit to it,” Councilor Jackie

Myers said.

Both maps opened up some extra industrial land surrounding the intersection West Elm Avenue and North First Place, including the property where Marlette Homes and Umatilla Electric Cooperative are located. It did not open up the property behind the Agape House, which is closer than 500 feet to Theater Sports Park.

Spencer did point out that anyone who wishes to build a project that does not fit all of the city’s zoning regulations is allowed to apply for a variance from the planning commission, granting an exception to that rule for the specific project.

Mayor David Drotzmann said it was a “misnomer” to think that if the city does nothing on the subject of a homeless shelter that the existing issues will go away. He said on a call with state Rep. Greg Smith earlier that day he discussed the community’s challenges with homelessness, and the need for more help with mental health and addiction resources in the area.

Candidate forum

During a forum for Hermiston City Council candidates on Oct. 6, the five candidates for four at-large seats on the council were asked to share their views on what role, if any, the city should play in tackling homelessness.

Incumbent Doug Primmer said the city has a responsibility to help all residents, including those that are homeless, and the city should look at “methods to provide some type of assistance.” However, he also stated he had heard that some homeless people were already moving to Hermiston specifically in the hopes of seeing a shelter built there. Police Chief Jason Edmiston told the council during a recent meeting that at least one person had told officers he had come to Hermiston specifically because he heard a shelter might be built.

“I don’t want us to be a destination for the homeless, or a

dumping point,” Primmer said.

Councilor David McCarthy said he felt it was in the city’s best interest to provide somewhere homeless residents can safely stay, and find services that will help them be “contributing members of society.”

“I don’t know if the answer is the projects that have been presented to us so far,” he said. “But I do think that, especially with the letters of support and the letters against projects like Stepping Stones, we need to be examining this more closely since this is an issue that, obviously, people care about.”

Maria Duron, who is running for the council for the first time, said homelessness is a “state issue” and the city should be looking toward state funding and partnerships with local groups to fund more permanent solutions than the Hermiston Warming Station and Martha’s House.

Councilor Rod Hardin said the city needs somewhere for homeless residents to stay, but he said the biggest challenge is finding the right location. He said he was pleased to see the faith community step up to look for solutions.

Nancy Peterson, also running for the first time, rebuked the rest of the candidates for the language they used when talking about the city’s homeless residents.

“I think the first thing we need to do is stop talking about ‘those homeless people’ and we need to start talking about ‘us,’” she said. “We need to personalize this because we are all — if not those of us in here, then the people we pass on the street — one or two paychecks away from being one of ‘those people.’”

Peterson said she was once homeless for three months, despite working two jobs during that time period. She said beyond shelter, people experiencing homelessness need access to things like showers, transportation and a place to pick up their mail in order to be able to get or keep a job.

Marchers celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day



Photos by Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

Protesters carry signs and march in support of Indigenous Peoples Day and for the abolition of Columbus Day as the sun sets along Highway 395 in Hermiston on Monday, Oct. 12, 2020.



Above, Kassi Harp, left, and her daughter Nova, 4, lead a group of marchers along Highway 395 in support of Indigenous Peoples Day and for the abolition of Columbus Day on Monday, Oct. 14, 2020, in Hermiston.

At left, protesters march along Highway 395 in support of Indigenous People’s Day

Hermiston

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