

Homelessness Proposal for the City of Ashland Ad Hoc Steering Committee

From: Ashland Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors Task Force on Homelessness

Background: The Ashland Chamber Board of Directors appointed a Task Force on the issue of homelessness in Ashland to identify issues affecting the business community and possible solutions for implementation. The members of the Task Force are members of the Board who volunteered their time to serve on the committee. Additionally, Board President, Pam Hammond wrote a letter to the membership encouraging them to form groups to submit their ideas to the City's Ad Hoc Homelessness Steering Committee.

Members: Pam Hammond, Paddington Station
Mark Marchetti, Ashland Community Hospital
Nancy Morgan, Yala
Meiwen Richards, People's Bank
Lisa Beam, Pasta Piatti and Sesame Asian Kitchen
Cindy Bernard, Rogue Valley Roasting Co.
Marie Donovan, Ashland Homes Real Estate
Sandra Slattery, Ashland Chamber of Commerce

Date: May 24, 2011

Contact: Sandra Slattery, Ashland Chamber of Commerce, PO Box 1360, Ashland, OR

Background:

The Task Force met and discussed the issues surrounding homelessness in Ashland. They determined that for the purpose of this proposal it would be important to define the term homelessness and then identify the issues and solutions as they see them.

They defined four groups of homelessness in Ashland:

- Economically displaced – those who are without financial resources to afford housing
- Children/students – those who are without family support
- Mentally ill – those who society does not provide a place to reside
- Lifestyle choice – “home free”

The Task Force unanimously supports efforts made to help the economically displaced, children without family support, and the mentally ill. They believe there are existing organizations whose mission is to serve those groups and that they deserve more adequate funding and support in order to expand their efforts. The Task Force wants to find ways to assist the associations with more funding and part of the solution will address this desire.

The Issue:

The issue the Task Force chose to define and work on solutions to address was the last one – the lifestyle choice. It is important to note that while some of the behaviors defined as unacceptable by the Task Force include some of the homeless in the downtown core, they were very clear in saying that they do not believe it is fair to call it a homeless issue. The issue is one of behavior among some of the homeless but

also belongs to people who are not homeless. These issues negatively affect business as residents, customers, employees and visitors have had numerous bad experiences. Many visitors indicated they do not wish to return to Ashland as their experiences spoiled their trip. Residents have indicated they do not want to visit the downtown and do not allow their children to go downtown alone. Employees do not feel safe walking to their cars alone at night. These are not random complaints but regular comments made by individuals voiced consistently to the Chamber, members of the Task Force and to businesses in the downtown.

Behavior issues that the Task Force defined that are prevalent in the downtown core and need significant attention include: aggressive panhandling, public intoxication and illegal drug use, public urination, intimidation, stalking, threatening language, vulgar and lewd behavior and language, aggressive dogs and defecation, vandalism, loud music and drumming, and the blocking of sidewalks and walkways.

Our Solutions:

Stop the flow of money in the downtown core that is given directly to the individuals who encourage the “home free” lifestyle. Instead, create locations for money to be given to organizations that can best help those who truly want to get out of homelessness. The Task Force believes that businesses would pay/sponsor donation boxes (i.e. parking meters) where people can make donations. A non-profit can be assigned the task of collection and distribution of funds. If this is something the Ad Hoc Committee would like to pursue, we are happy to help on this project with coordination of the business locations.

A communication plan needs to be developed to spread the word that we are a community of caring individuals who wish to help those in need. Businesses can help fund a marketing outreach through signs, brochures and education of businesses such as lodging establishments. The Chamber is happy to assist in this effort, informing visitors that we have a program. We want them to support and not give directly to the panhandlers. We really want to help those in need and not support a lifestyle of dependency. Let’s contribute to those organizations that are here to help.

Finally, the Task Force believes there needs to be a change in the presence of the police in the downtown core. Many of the behaviors indicated above are dramatically decreased when the police are on-foot on the downtown streets. Not only does it decrease the crime and aggressive behavior, it makes people feel safe. The Task Force feels it is important for this coverage to be seven days a week throughout the day and evening. Additionally, it is important that those officers get to know the business owners and employees on a first-name basis to foster a greater level of communication between businesses and the police. The Task Force believes that community policing is the direction we need to pursue and that it should be funded appropriately. Appropriate police coverage will also ensure that those who are on the street and need help can be directed to the proper agency or organization.

The core of our business activity occurs in the downtown, the quality of life that draws many residents and businesses here is defined in no small part by the experience they have walking in the downtown. It will be only lip service to say we want economic development, business growth, tourism development and a friendly, walkable downtown if we do not seriously address these concerns. We are willing, able and desiring that you, the Ad Hoc Committee, work on these issues with us. We appreciate your time and dedication to this difficult and complicated task. We believe the good citizens of Ashland, all working together, can find solutions to make our community better; an Ashland we can all be proud of into the future. Thank you.

Costs:

- Donation Boxes: Funded by businesses – such as the repurposing of old parking meters

- Collection and Distribution of Funds: Administered by an appointed non-profit organization
- Additional police coverage: Funded through our taxes