

Kelly Wessels, Chief Operating Officer of UCAN and Grants Pass Mayor Sara Bristol updated Democrats on the effort to use the former UCAN (United Community Action Network) building on 7th Street as a temporary homeless shelter at their February 9th ZOOM meeting. Mayor Bristol said the City Council has approved a 90-day temporary use permit allowing Rogue Retreat to use the empty building as a shelter. Rogue Retreat is a non-profit organized in 1998, originally as a recovery house for those suffering from addiction. RR now works to provide affordable housing and shelter for the homeless and help them with the skills they need to live independently [Rogue Retreat | Restoring Lives](#) .

The use permit does not allow continued use of the building, Bristol said. That would take a change in zoning which could be a challenge, given the number of people who oppose having a shelter in their neighborhood. Bristol says there seems to be a lot of confusion about the shelter. What's proposed isn't an emergency shelter where people line up to get in in the evening and then leave in the morning. In that situation there can be the kind of loitering concerning neighbors around 7th Street. This shelter will require pre-approval for participants, who will be allowed to stay there until they find a better situation, or until the 90-days is up. There will be social services offered to help people get on their feet and overcome barriers to becoming housed. Rogue Retreat operates an urban campground, the Kelly Shelter in downtown Medford, and Hope Village, a tiny-house community for the homeless there.

Meanwhile, the Council is looking for ways to either continue to utilize the 7th Street building if the shelter proves to be a good neighbor or look for other locations in Grants Pass. One of the appeals of the former UCAN building is that it has several small, individual rooms, each with its own sink. That provides a safer situation for people while COVID continues to affect the community, Bristol said. The Kelly Shelter in Medford is just one big room with bunk beds crowded in next to each other with only a sheet of plexiglass dividing them.

Wessels reported Rogue Retreat is now hiring people to staff the Grants Pass shelter when opened and has been an excellent partner with UCAN on past projects. She stressed the shelter is part of a larger wellness issue in the area where the homeless are not just transients passing through.

“They are people who have roots in this community, they have family, some generational.” She said.

There are about 1,422 “unstably housed” people in Josephine County, a number that has held fairly steady over the past five years or so. Of those, 46 percent are under age 18, Wessels reported.

“These are people who couch surf, stay in their cars...can you imagine the trauma these kids go through? It's hard enough to be a kid these days. Those who really care about the health of our community, care about people thriving and being prosperous, can't say we have a good life here when someone else is suffering,” Wessels said.

Economically, it also makes sense to find and fund shelters and housing for the homeless, she said. It costs about \$100,000 a year to maintain a homeless person in a community. This includes

things like social services, law enforcement, food distribution, clothing, medical care. Once that person finds a home he or she only costs \$43,000 in public services, Wessels said.

“That’s a significant savings. We don’t realize what the costs are that a shelter can help mitigate with interventions,” she said.

Sometimes all it takes is doing a bit of barrier removal once a person has a stable place to stay. Helping someone get an ID can then help them get medical services and Social Security Disability if they qualify, which can help them live a little better.

The pandemic has created a situation where we are enabling the spreading of COVID by not having a place where the homeless can stay without being sent out into the community every day. Right now, the homeless can sleep in the park and many are staying on Riverside Park land around the Caveman Bridge. They can’t set up until 5 p.m. and must be out by 7 a.m. They congregate at that spot, then disperse out into town all day. It would be better if they could all stay in one place and not become contagion spreaders, Wessels said.

“It’s not a good thing to make people without access to adequate health care and hygiene move around in the community,” she said.

Both Wessels and Bristol like the idea of developing an “urban campground” for the homeless as well as having a shelter. A shelter may not have room for every homeless person who wants to access it and there are always those who aren’t comfortable being in a crowded situation. However, both know it would be difficult to find a place where people could set up their camps because of neighbors’ objections. Many Grants Pass citizens have made it clear they don’t like having a homeless camp at the foot of their historic bridge. It would probably take someone willing to let the homeless use their private property for that to happen, they agreed.

In Jackson County, officials are looking at getting a grant to set up small sleeping shelters for people at the urban campground. They’re finding out tents aren’t that great in bad weather, Bristol said.

Questions from those attending the meeting included how can the often vicious, intense bigotry against the homeless in the community be changed? Bristol said it isn’t easy to change beliefs but hopes the homeless themselves can help by being good neighbors when the shelter opens. Right now many neighbors assume increased crime would follow the opening of a shelter in their vicinity. In Medford, law enforcement interventions actually went down after the shelter opened. When people have a place to use a toilet when they need to, they won’t leave a mess in the bushes.

The shelter will have staff present 24 hours to make sure everyone in it is safe, and the Council is requiring a concierge service to patrol the neighborhood during selected hours.

Josephine County Democrats Chair Dorothy Yetter asked what we, as Democrats, can do to help the homeless in our community. Bristol and Wessels had a list:

Provide public comment whenever a homeless issue comes up in the city or county, either through ZOOM, emails or a written note.

Lobby the council to change the zoning to allow the UCAN building to be used as a permanent shelter.

Volunteer to help at the shelter, either inside or with other things, such as maintenance around the building.

If you know anyone who has a business in the area of the shelter tell them you are in favor of having a place for the homeless. Let them know their customers want this to happen.

Help find someone willing to let the homeless set up a camp on private property.

Encourage the City to let the homeless leave their camps up on the park property near the Caveman Bridge.