

**Star News
Editorials**

Planning commission made right call for homeless shelter

“Those people” are all around us.

You know, “those people,” the undesirable castoffs of society.

“Those people,” the ones who are addicts and alcoholics. The ones whose mental health issues and past trauma manifests in cycles of physical and mental abuse. The ones who can’t seem to keep a job or get it together.

At Monday night’s city of Medford planning commission meeting, what to do with and where to put “those people” was the crux of the discussion around a request for a conditional use permit to use an empty assisted living facility as a homeless shelter.

This is the third time the commission has addressed this issue. The first, in the downtown commercial district, was found to be a poor fit. Last year, after the city and county cooperated on a search, a vacant three-plex on 4th Street looked to be the solution. It was, up until it was discovered that it would take nearly a half million dollars to renovate the building to meet the needs of a shelter. In December, the former Deerview Apartments, an assisted living facility, became vacant and the owner

was looking to sell. It is close to a turn-key ready opportunity allowing resources to go toward providing services to people in need rather than paying for construction crews and building supplies.

Nearby residents raised legitimate questions. What impact would having “those people” nearby have on their neighborhood, their property values and their family’s safety? These are all legitimate questions, after all no one wants “those people” in their backyards.

After all, would you?

“Those people,” the unlucky ones who lack a secure place to sleep. The couch surfers who never seem able to catch a break. The ones who move from campground to campground through the warmer months or who work hard but can never seem to scrape up enough for the security deposit and first month’s rent. “Those people” are the homeless who many times have given up on hope.

It is good to not be one of “those people.” It is good to sit and watch television in our warm homes. It is good to cook meals in our well-stocked kitchens and sit at our tables and help our children and grandchildren with

their homework assignments and projects.

It is good not to think too hard about how close we all are to being one of “those people.” Addiction, as with other mental health issues, does not pay attention to last names, fancy titles or addresses. Domestic abuse is not confined to the proverbial wrong side of the tracks. Divorce or the death of the primary breadwinner in a family happens every day.

“Those people” are our neighbors. They are our family members. They pray beside us at church and their children sit beside ours in the classrooms. They are among us and are part of the community. They too need, as we all do, a place to be secure, a foundation upon which to build a future.

Planning commission members had a tough call to make Monday night. It is their thankless job to take the long view and look to what is in the best longterm interests of the community as a whole. It is a job that wins few friends, especially when it comes to deciding that “those people” need a place too.

Taylor County needs to rethink work week

Faced with challenges in filling positions and escalating personnel costs, Taylor County should look at maximizing their current workforce as much as possible.

As noted by Patrick Glynn of Carlson Dettmann Consulting, the county’s default 35-hour work week for some positions is a barrier to attracting staff.

The standard for work weeks is 40 hours, which translates into 2,080 hours per year. Decades ago, as part of a cost saving measure, the county board switched to a default of 35-hours per week or 1,820 per year.

What this means is that hourly workers on the 35-hour schedule take home 12.5% less than their peers earning the same hourly rate on a 40-hour schedule. This made sense in times when jobs in the area were scarce and the pool of applicants seeking any county jobs were deep. Now, with job seekers able to have their pick of opportunities, it presents an unneeded barrier toward people being able to take county positions.

The county has had people hired to fill spots only to have them leave to go back to their previous employment because they would be making less at the county due to the work schedule. With the costs involved in recruiting, interviewing and bringing someone on board, having them leave county employment right away is a waste.

Beyond recruitment, the county only sort of follows its own 35-hour week schedule. Over the years since it was implemented, departments have sought exemptions for different positions bringing them up to 40-hour weeks. Beyond that, salaried employees such as department heads are routinely expected to put the hours in that are needed to get the tasks done often resulting in longer than 40-hour weeks.

According to human resources director Marie Koerner, only 16% or 29 of the county’s 180 total employees work a 35 hour week versus a 40 hour week. This does not include any of the part-time employees such as some office staff and the nutrition site managers.)

While five hours a week may not seem like a significant amount of time, over the 29 positions it would work out to the county getting the equivalent work of nearly four additional employees over the course of a year. While there are additional payroll expenses through wages and associated costs there would be substantial savings versus adding those staff members, not only through recruitment and training costs but also on the benefits side of the pay matrix.

As a follow up to revamping its pay matrix, Taylor County leaders should look at revising staffing needs county-wide to see if there are areas of duplication or opportunities to share staffing

resources. Before filling any new positions, the county must explore if existing staff are being fully utilized or if they have the ability to absorb more duties.

It is time for the county to phase out the 35-hour work week entirely and move to a uniform 40-hour week for county employees.



Members of *The Star News* editorial board include Publisher Carol O’Leary, General Manager Kris O’Leary and News Editor Brian Wilson.

Star News Quote of the Week:

“If I could put it in my backyard I would,”

— Joshua Kohl, pastor of River of Hope Church speaking in support of issuing a conditional use permit for a homeless shelter. See the full story on page 1

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