

John & Janet Crews

Owners: Champion Street Center buildings
Corner of Railroad and Champion
Bellingham, WA. 98225

February 3, 2018

Dear Members of the Homeless Strategies Workgroup,

I am writing to express our deep fears and concerns regarding the consideration of 211 Champion Street as a possible location for a new Low Barrier Homeless Shelter. While we applaud the city's efforts to find solutions to help those who are homeless, we strongly believe that the location on Champion Street is an astonishingly unwise choice, and that it would have serious long term negative consequences for the people who live or work in the vicinity, the people who visit this part of downtown, and potentially the entire Commercial Core of downtown Bellingham. I am sure that others more knowledgeable than I will address the serious concerns about placing this so near to the very successful new Walton housing project as well as other issues, so I will restrict my comments to my area of knowledge along north Railroad Ave.

In considering how a decision will affect an area, a good place to start is to look at the relevant history of the area being considered, and how similar issues have affected it in the past, for better or worse. I would like to tell this story from a personal perspective, because I would like give faces to the story rather than just buildings. The area that would clearly be most affected by the 211 Champion location would be the north end of Railroad Ave, in particular between Magnolia and Champion, though the effects will certainly travel much further in all directions, and especially down Railroad Ave towards the south. For most of the past century, these northern blocks of Railroad Ave have been an active area for small start up businesses to find a home. Our family first started a small floor covering store in this block right after WWII, eventually bought a storefront, and over time believed enough in the area to acquire adjoining spaces extending to the Champion Street corner. More recently the focus along this block has shifted to service businesses such as cafes, restaurants, hair salons, and family entertainment. The common theme throughout this history is that the area tends to be home to young entrepreneurs with small family owned businesses that rely on safe and easy public access.

Around the millennium, a serious and disturbing trend started to happen along this northern block of Railroad. Large groups of street people started hanging out along the sidewalks, and particularly at the corners. These groups could reach 20 or more along the entire block, and included many who were intimidating to shoppers, employees, and pedestrians in general. Anti-social behavior and crime increased, and businesses started to move out. These vacant spaces compounded the problem, and the north end of the block became a center for open drug dealing and prostitution. The beautiful 15' circular planter that the city had built on the corner was overrun with people trampling the plants and creating a bastion for illegal activities. When I confronted some of the obvious drug dealers on the corner, they made it clear that this was now their turf, and they intended to keep it. They were in fact winning because potential new businesses were often too intimidated to even get out of their cars to look at spaces for rent. People from nearby businesses like Horizon Bank were afraid to walk down this sidewalk, and would take a longer way around the block to shop or go to lunch.

Our family property on Railroad was faced with some tough decisions; 1. Create further decline of the neighborhood by taking in the only tenants who thought they might survive, such as convenience stores focussing on alcohol and tobacco. 2. Take the advice of a property manager who suggested that we accept the loss of the neighborhood and bulldoze down the buildings to create a parking lot. 3. Undertake a major renovation in an attempt to re-attract strong young entrepreneurs who would be willing to tackle the problems head on. Most people told us that they thought the third option would be insane. We did decide to be insane, and spent our savings to perform a major upgrade to the northern end of Railroad

Ave in the belief that through combined efforts from the city, young entrepreneurs with vision, and our own efforts, we could reclaim this neighborhood for the businesses of downtown Bellingham, and the people of the greater Bellingham area who wanted to be able to once again visit this area in safety and security.

Against the odds, you probably know how the story ends, at least up until this point. The north end of Railroad is now filled with successful small family businesses in an area that is once again safe and comfortable to walk through, whether on an art walk, to go to lunch, or just to stroll through downtown. The process was not easy, and there is a great deal of credit to go around. Then Mayor Mark Asmundson was very active in finding ways to help turn things around. The Downtown Renaissance Network (now the Downtown Bellingham Partnership) played a very large role, and we should all be forever grateful for the many ways in which the BPD stepped in with foot patrols, bike patrols, a police sub station in the bus station, and an incredible level of personal dedication from too many officers to be named here.

With all of the credit that the afore mentioned are due, the biggest heroes were the brave young families who committed their life and savings to their dreams of opening their own businesses. They were courageous enough to gamble their savings and their dreams on the belief that they could revitalize this downtrodden part of downtown. For anyone who really knows the history of downtown over the past decade, you will know that the true hero of the story is Dianna DelGiorgio. She literally built Caffè Adagio with her own hands, and specifically to the point of this letter she took on the anti-social and criminal element who had declared this as their turf. She stood toe to toe with armed drug dealers, drunks, and street toughs, and protected her dream. She worked closely with dedicated police officers to make the area safe for her employees and the visitors to her Caffè. Her success inspired other young entrepreneurs to fill the adjoining storefronts and realize their dreams as well. It must be noted with urgency that this leader and contributor to so many downtown issues now feels seriously distressed and threatened by the thought of a shelter in this business neighborhood, and all that this could do to her business, her family, and her neighbors. This would be a heartless thank you from the city of Bellingham to one of its most devoted citizens who has volunteered many hundreds of hours to downtown meetings and projects.

Unfortunately this past challenge that was overcome by the small business people of downtown was not the only instance to show how easily a community of small family businesses can be negatively impacted, and the fortitude it takes to survive. Shortly after the neighborhood was starting to be reinvigorated, a very well meaning group started offering free meals from the same vacant lot that is now being considered for a shelter. On the surface, this seemed like a kind endeavor. However, the small family businesses and their employees were now confronted with the reality of attracting those who are struggling with powerful life challenges such as alcohol, drug addiction, or mental illness into a business district, making it very difficult to co-exist or thrive together. There was an increase in drunken and anti-social behavior. Business owners and their employees would regularly find human feces and urine in their entryways that they would clean up by hand. People would be found defecating, urinating, sleeping, or changing clothing in front of people visiting businesses in the area. I do not believe that the homeless people doing these acts were at fault. I believe that the fault lay entirely with the well meaning people who did not understand the consequences of drawing people into an environment where their needs and well being are so mis-aligned with those trying to keep small businesses alive and thriving. Happily, once the negative consequences made clear the problems this created for everyone involved, the meal program was wisely discontinued. Now the question before us is whether the lessons from these past experiences have been learned, or whether we are doomed to repeat the mistakes with a ten fold intensity.

Right now the reality is this; we do not know if the family of small businesses and their employees in this neighborhood can survive another onslaught of such conflicting lifestyles and goals. In the past events, the disruptive influence involved a few dozen people; the current question involves a couple of hundred. Do people like Dianna, other business owners, and their employees have the will and stamina to survive another onslaught of alcohol, drugs, and anti-social behavior? I do not believe that anyone has the right to put them through another round of social challenges to keeping their dreams alive. These small business families along with their employees are currently fulfilling their dreams, and continue to work hard with the support of each other, the support of the Downtown Bellingham Partnership, and the support of city officials like

the dedicated downtown police officers. I strongly believe that it would be irresponsible, bordering on criminal, to import 200 people whose lifestyle would be so much in conflict with the continued thriving of these small family businesses.

Having said all that, I think that it is important when we speak out against something, that we also take the time to offer positive alternatives. What are the alternatives in terms of locations for a new shelter? 1. The worst possible choice is anywhere in an area of small retail and service businesses. I do not think that anyone is crazy enough to put a shelter in the middle of a large shopping mall; this service and retail area of downtown is no different. 2. The next problematic location would be in a residential district, though since a shelter is a residential use, it makes more sense than in a business setting. 3. Putting a shelter in the center of an area of government buildings makes the most sense, since it offers many support opportunities such as unemployment offices, police support and security, access to government offices to obtain support, and healthy options like libraries. It also avoids any serious deleterious side effects, since the presence of the shelter is not going to affect people doing business with the government the way it would with private businesses. I truly believe that this is the best solution with the most benefits for the homeless, and the least impact on other citizens. I must hope that those in government would have the courage and compassion to welcome the homeless in their neighborhood, rather than pushing the problem nearer to its other citizens' homes or places of business. 4. If an option surrounded by government support is not possible, the next best choice would be light industrial areas. The current Lighthouse Mission is a perfect example of this sort of appropriate location, and the area would certainly make sense for a second facility if needed. I have heard that some people do not want to use this area because they have future hopes of upgrading the area. If that is the case, how could anyone justify using the Champion Street location in a neighborhood that has already gone through the stress and challenges of successfully upgrading itself? I would think that there might also be some good options in the light industrial areas northeast of downtown near Iowa Street, or in the lower Cornwall Ave area.

I would like to finish with a few quotes and comments from the Downtown Bellingham Plan of 2014.

1. In the section entitled Downtown Employment, it begins by saying; **“A healthy and supportive business environment is crucial to Downtown’s success.”** Forcefully importing 200 homeless people into an area filled with small businesses is completely contrary to creating “A healthy and supportive business environment”.
2. In the section entitled “A Safe and Welcoming Downtown”; it begins by saying; **“To capitalize on the many cultural and entertainment options available Downtown, people must feel safe and comfortable. The cleanliness, comfort, and safety of Downtown are key to attracting residential, business and tourism investment.”** We have learned from past experiences that importing homeless people into a small business environment runs exactly contrary to all of these points.
3. From the “Community Solutions Workgroup 2014”; **“While the issues facing downtown are complex, the workgroup identified six main challenge areas: Mental Health; Homelessness; Crime; Clean and Safe Environment; Alcohol and Drug Abuse; and Public Education and Perception.”** Putting a shelter on Champion street would focus all of these challenges into that small business area, 200 strong. I cannot imagine a worse strategy for dealing with these issues in the downtown area.

We all want to be fair to those dealing with homelessness, and we want to see them treated with compassion. The point of this letter is that families who are working hard to live the challenging dream of having a small business deserve no less fair treatment and compassion. Please do not “throw them under the bus” and threaten to destroy their dreams with an unwise and unfair shelter location. Please eliminate 211 Champion Street from consideration for a new homeless shelter.

Sincerely yours,

John and Janet Crews