

From: Arrissia Owen
Subject: Public Comment for HSW 2-19-21
Date: Friday, February 19, 2021 1:44:45 PM

For Homeless Strategies Workgroup, public comment, Feb. 19, 2021.

Stakeholders:

From the Whatcom County website: The Homeless Strategies Workgroup, an ad-hoc committee, was established in October 2017, by [Resolution 2017-055](#), to identify alternative solutions (two to three, by resolution) to living unsheltered in Whatcom County, with priority given to solutions to prevent people from having no other option than to sleep outside as the weather gets cold.

That purpose was amended by County Council on July 23, 2019, updating the purpose of HSG to “identify additional temporary winter shelters and added capacity for year round shelters. Additionally, the workgroup will identify ways to address the needs of the county’s homeless population and prevent people from having no other option than to sleep outside.”

Every meeting lately seems to be focused on figuring out what it is you are supposed to be doing. It’s pretty clear though. Figure out alternative solutions for unsheltered people and then advise the County Council on your findings and urge them to take action. Every one of you is a stakeholder. Every one of you has an audience with County and City councils, some are even on those councils, some are in power at the Department of Health, some are executive directors of agencies. If this group cannot figure out even what it is you’re supposed to be doing, we have a serious issue here.

Grant requirements from the Department of Commerce that are awarded to local governments and agencies all require that priority “must” be given to the people who are already homeless. The Consolidated Grant Program requires the county to have at least one low-barrier shelter that is not allowed to exclude people because of “other behaviors that are perceived as indicating a lack of ‘housing readiness,’ including resistance to receiving services.”

From what I have heard out of the mouths of people employed at the various subgrantees of the city and county is that the Housing Pool is nothing but subjective. How staff determines whether people can stay at the emergency congregate shelter, Base Camp, also seems to be subjective, and plenty are turned away for a wide array of issues, when there is no other safe option during winter.

Some shelters on paper in Whatcom County, as reported to the Department of Commerce,

no longer exist. The Drop-in Shelter is required to show that half of the people who visit the shelter exit to “positive outcome destinations, and that is supposed to increase by 5 percent yearly. Is that happening? Because it sure seems like people are turned out daily to roam the streets with no particular direction of where to go or what to do.

Are we tracking the needs of the people who are unsheltered? Do we know what services they need? It blows my mind that everytime this is asked, everyone whose job it is to know these numbers seems to shrug their shoulders and have no idea. The [Homeless Housing and Assistance Act of 2005](#) requires the Department of Commerce to collect HMIS data in the form of a data warehouse, with each Homeless Service Provider submitting that data to DoC [yearly](#), and then report it to [HUD](#). The purpose of this is so that the Continuum of Care can provide guidance for the planning process for the Consolidated Plan.

How do we know what is needed in the homeless population unless we collect this data?

The state of Washington has the fifth highest rate of homelessness, despite being considered a fairly wealthy state per capita. Why?

Per the [DoC](#): “Rents have increased sharply since 2012, and not just in the Puget Sound Corridor. Statewide average monthly rents increased \$111 from 2012 to 2015 (from \$838 to \$949), a 16% increase. Rent increases were most pronounced in urban centers such as King County which saw increases of \$250 in average monthly rents (from \$978 to \$1,228; +26%), but even more rural areas have seen rent increases (e.g. Chelan County saw rents increase 8%). Problems caused by rent increases are exacerbated by the associated issue of very low vacancy rates, which make it difficult for people to find a unit even when they have sufficient income or rental assistance to pay market rents. In Washington State the vacancy rate was 3.3% in 2015, and even lower in some urban areas.”

As we know, the vacancy rate in Whatcom County has varied from 1 to 3 percent. None of this is a mystery. It’s in our own Comprehensive Plan. There have been clear directives given as to what needs to be done to address this issue and fulfill mandates associated with the Growth Management Plan, yet there seems to be an element of we-don’t-know-what-to-do-or-why-it’s-happening every time this is addressed by local legislators and heads of agencies.

What’s even more puzzling is that our mayor, Seth Fleetwood, has publicly acknowledged all of this. In his [campaign promises](#), listed second is “working towards collaborative and effective solutions to Bellingham’s homelessness problem and home affordability.” Has he made that a priority? Seems like his answer to every solution suggested is that the city can’t do it. Another campaign promise: “Promoting an attitude and atmosphere that helps Bellingham become an inclusive, equitable and empowered community that values everyone.” I would like to remind Mayor Fleetwood that “everybody” includes our

unsheltered neighbors who have been priced out of this housing market.

In an interview with [Common Threads](#) while campaigning to be Mayor, in addition to acknowledging that Base Camp is not suitable for all unsheltered people, he also said this, citing a community survey: “80 to 85 percent of people listed home affordability and the homelessness crisis that we’re seeing as a concern. Addressing home affordability and the homelessness crisis that we’re seeing as a concern. Addressing home affordability and the homelessness issue in Bellingham are critical. Those are important things that the next mayor will have to address successfully.”

He goes on to dig into the root of the problem and what needs to be done:

“Our Growth Management Act was very much a political compromise, and it has a whole series of things that demonstrates a value, and they are elastic in their nature. There's a constant tension going on about what should be emphasized. I mean, we have a policy in Bellingham, for example, about trying to accommodate future growth within the existing footprint, which is based very much on this view that if you expand growth boundaries over time at every review, obviously you urbanize the whole county like they've done in King County for example. Having said that, our comprehensive plan presently, as a preferred method for how we accommodate growth, says that we shall provide: some consideration of strategic expansions of growth boundaries when it's appropriate, some use of lands that aren't presently built, infill opportunities within the city, and a primary emphasis on urban growth, on urban villages. Is that enough to accommodate growth? Well that's something that we're going to have to look at closely.”

The city and county comprehensive plans contain a [housing](#) element that addresses the housing needs of each jurisdiction and offers suggestions for changes that could occur to help meet these needs.

My call to action for stakeholders in this workgroup is to not only provide warming centers or additional emergency winter shelter, but to get creative about solutions that address the needs of all the various subgroups within the unsheltered community. The one-size-fits-all, take-it-or-leave-it approach to providing emergency shelter within the confines of a religious institution is not cutting it. Please stop the narrative that if volunteers were not helping with various camps that everyone would go to Base Camp and it will fill up again. That is not true.

Please stop characterizing volunteers as anti-fa or violent. That’s ridiculous. Anyone can become violent when pushed to the brink or desperate for survival. The conditions the city and county continue to foster is what is making people aggressive. This conversation has been going on for years. At some point, people start yelling and screaming when they are not heard.

My other call to action is to beg all of you to please do some homework. Brush up on Chapter 3 of the Comprehensive Plan, the section about housing that spells out goals and gives suggestions about what to do, such as minimizing the time required for processing housing-related development and construction permits and streamlining/simplifying the process. Encouraging mixed land uses. Provide incentives to create affordable housing and in land use regulations in Urban Growth Areas and Planned Unit Developments. Encourage adequate housing types at every economic level. Identify and remove impediments to affordable housing. **Allow development of smaller lots and creative options.**

Also, please familiarize yourself with the city's own [stats](#) on homelessness that show 67 percent of Bellingham residents can't afford to buy a median-priced home here. Read the city's [Coalition to End Homelessness report from 2019](#), the one submitted to the Department of Commerce to show what we are doing with grant money to address homelessness and remain within the [guidelines](#) to be reimbursed. Are we making people who are unsheltered a priority with the funding, as required?

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Arrissia Owen Turner
Bellingham Resident