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WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

Homeless Strategies Workgroup

MEMO

Date: June 19, 2020
To: Homeless Strategies Workgroup (HSW) Members
From: Councilmember Barry Buchanan
RE: Homelessness Activities during COVID-19 Emergency

The following regular update to Homeless Strategies Workgroup (HSW) members is also available on the [Meeting Information page](#). Please email any feedback or questions to Cathy Halka at chalka@co.whatcom.wa.us.

Temporary Homeless Shelter

Lighthouse Mission Ministries (LMM) reports the greatest number of people staying the night while at Bellingham High School (BHS) in the last two weeks has been approximately 180 people.

On June 16, 2020, the Bellingham City Council approved a new temporary shelter location at 1530 Cornwall Avenue, with a lease agreement for 3 years and option for an additional year. The temporary shelter location will be an interim solution until Lighthouse Mission can complete its building expansion. The current temporary shelter location at BHS must be vacated by July 15, 2020.

For more information on the new temporary shelter, please see attached Bellingham Herald article.

For more information about LMM and the BHS Shelter, please see the FAQs at <https://www.thelighthousemission.org/news/drop-in-center-faqs/>

Member Vacancies on Homeless Strategies Workgroup

Please help spread the word about HSW member vacancies. There are currently 3 vacancies, including member representatives of the following:

- Special populations (representing domestic violence, behavioral health, and/or elder care and medically fragile),
- Homeless children and families, and
- Schools.

In addition, the Homeless Advocate member position on the Homeless Strategies workgroup expires in July 2020, and the County Council is accepting applications for that position as well.

The purpose of the HSW is to identify additional winter shelters and added capacity at year-round

shelters, additional opportunities to address the needs of the County's homeless population, and strategies to prevent people from having no other option than to sleep outside. All appointees must live in and be registered to vote in Whatcom County. The County Council appointed workgroup generally meets twice a month or as needed, *however during COVID-19 the HSW has been meeting as needed*. These Council-appointed members serve 2-year terms.

Applications for membership are due by 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday, June 30, 2020.

For more information on how to apply, please visit <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/1584/How-to-Apply> or call the County Council office at 360-778-5010.

Byron Avenue Quarantine & Isolation Facility

The Byron Avenue Isolation and Quarantine facility served 41 individuals as of June 17, 2020. There are 58 rooms available for this service, 25 of which are operational.

Bellingham Herald

Bellingham City Council takes emergency action to lease new site for homeless shelter

Available online: <https://www.bellinghamherald.com/news/local/article243590052.html>

BY ROBERT MITTENDORF

JUNE 17, 2020 07:22 AM

Bellingham City Council members unanimously approved a long-term lease for what they said would be a temporary homeless shelter in the vacant Public Market building downtown.

Their vote Tuesday night, June 16, 2020, was held via an online meeting app because of the new coronavirus pandemic.

It was an emergency action taken during a special public hearing, and it takes effect immediately.

Bellingham City Council members unanimously approved a long-term lease for what they said would be a temporary homeless shelter in the vacant Public Market building downtown.

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SOME BUSINESS OWNERS CRITICAL

But several business owners weren't convinced.

"One thing that is missing is support for businesses that will be impacted," said Lydia Bennett of Bellingham. "One thing I don't like is the secrecy — that was despicable."

Lawyer Frank Chmelik said it will keep people from going downtown to eat and shop — choosing instead Barkley Village or Fairhaven.

"They stand in the doorway and interfere with commerce," he said.

Chmelik suggested building a tent camp at Civic Field until a more suitable location is found.

Christopher Renoud of Fairhaven said he's worried that he will lose tenants in a commercial building he owns nearby.

"I have felt helpless and betrayed by a city I grew up with," Renoud said. "We need to put the brakes on this process and take a step back and do it the right way. Placing a low-barrier shelter in the downtown business core is never a good idea."

Jessica Valentine told the council that she lives near Bellingham High and has seen a rise in vandalism, crime and noise since the drop-in shelter moved there in March.

"It has made an impact," she told the council. "None of our neighbors want to stand outside and talk at night because it's not safe."

COMPASSION, UNDERSTANDING URGED

Claire Thurman-Moore urged compassion and understanding.

"There's no good location, because homelessness, mental illness and addiction are problems none of us wants to face," she said. "The truth is, they are part of our community,"

Council President Gene Knutson, who works at Bellingham Cold Storage on the waterfront, said Bellingham's struggle with homelessness was one reason he ran for City Council in 1993.

"I fully understand people's concerns," Knutson said. "I've known people I've worked with who live (at the shelter) and I've driven them home. These are everyday people."

City Council member Hollie Huthman, who owns The Shakedown nightclub on State Street, said she understands their fears.

"We're thinking very deeply about how to make this work for everybody," Huthman said. "The downtown that I love can flip this narrative — as one of our speakers said — and make the best of the situation."

SHELTER DEAL HAPPENED QUICKLY

Swift action was required because the current shelter at Bellingham High School, in operation since late March, must be moved by July 15 to accommodate the anticipated start of classes in late August, officials said.

It was chosen from several sites that were considered over the past several weeks, said Public Works Director Eric Johnston.

Fleetwood said the shelter will be run by the Lighthouse Mission, which will pay half of the \$3 million required to lease, renovate and run the shelter over three years.

Bellingham will pay \$700,000 and Whatcom County will pay \$800,000 toward leasing and improvements and the Lighthouse Mission will pay an estimated \$1.5 million in operating costs during that time.

There's an option to renew the lease for a fourth year, but no longer, said Peter Ruffatto, city attorney.

Its size is 25,000 square feet, with a parking lot and grounds at 50,000 square feet, officials said.

Renovations will start immediately.

LIGHTHOUSE SEEKS NEW SHELTER

Meanwhile, the Lighthouse Mission will be raising money to build a permanent shelter, possibly near its current location on West Holly Street in Old Town.

Hans Erchinger-Davis, the mission's executive director, said that no COVID-19 cases have been found among the 160 people sleeping in the high school gym.

"It's helped our people feel like they're part of society again," Erchinger-Davis said.

During a presentation on the site Tuesday, city officials said they had considered several locations in recent weeks, but the Public Market was the best and cheapest option.

Talks with the owner began in mid-May, and state law allows governments to conduct private negotiations, Fleetwood said.

Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu acknowledged that the site was not without its faults, but that a shelter was needed now.

'We all know that inaction is a terrible choice,' Sidhu told the council. "The Public Market site is not the perfect site. But I've often said that 'perfect' is the enemy of good. A response is needed, and it is needed in a short span of time."

CITY WILL TAKE STEPS TO DEAL WITH ISSUES

Bellingham officials have been searching for a permanent homeless shelter since 2015.

A drop-in shelter across from the Lighthouse Mission has been plagued by crime and disruptive behavior that city officials said was not caused by shelter residents.

Rick Sepler, director of planning and community development, said the city will take steps to ensure that crime, noise, overnight car-camping and other issues will be addressed.

Sepler said he lives across the street from the current shelter at Bellingham High, one block from the Public Market site, and he advocated for the downtown location.

Council member Pinky Vargas agreed.

"Homeless shelters need to be downtown because that's where the services are and that's where people congregate," Vargas said, noting that the site is near the Bellingham Public Library and the Whatcom Transportation Authority bus terminal.