



ANDY CRIPE PHOTOS, MID-VALLEY MEDIA

Pioneer Park in Corvallis also has a sizable tent city, especially near the railroad tracks (rear) on the park’s east side.

Homeless

From A1

Would those pending recommendations have made any difference in the series of actions that have taken place? And what happens when those recommendations reach the public? How will they influence the fight against homelessness moving forward. Is there hope for HOPE?

It’s a classic process vs. product debate, says Aleita Hass-Holcombe the long-time guiding force behind the drop-in center, which provides, coffee, snacks, mail pickup, document assistance and other services.

“I hope (play on words) that the process will move the needle forward on ending homelessness,” said Hass-Holcombe, who is also is HOPE board member. “The recommendations are only as powerful as the responses that could come from them. Just as the valuable recommendations that HOC and HOAC presented, moving the needle forward depends on the folks that receive the recommendations.”

Corvallis Mayor Biff Traber served as co-chair of both the Homeless Oversight Committee and the Housing Opportunities Action Council. He urges patience.

“In the world I envisioned in 2019, we would have had some of those recommendations in hand before we got into this current shelter season,” he said. “But, alas COVID happened and HOPE was on hold in the early months as we all figured out the virus. When it restarted, HOPE could have pivoted and tried to make recommendations on incomplete information.

“However, I decided not to push hard for that as we did need to have HOPE complete its community input before making the long-term recommendations. We at the city, council and staff, just had to make the best of a difficult situation in the short term.”

Some question how nimble and responsive a 21-person body can be. The board spent 30 minutes at its November 2020 meeting updating the section of its bylaws on excused absences.

“I do not know how a large advisory body would be able to respond swiftly to evolving challenges,” said Sara Ingle, president of the Stone Soup board. “We may not like some of our community solutions such as managed camping, but it is a temporary solution and better (in safety and services) than unmanaged camping. I do not think that HOPE was ever intended to manage day-to-day or month-to-month challenges.

“I think that HOPE intends to come up with research-informed solutions for providing for those who are unhoused in our community. I expect that these might be large, comprehensive ideas that would take months and years to bring to fruition if there was political will to do so.”

The Gazette-Times singled out Benton County Commissioner Xan Augerot and Corvallis Councilors Jan Napack (Ward 1) and Charles Maughan (Ward 2) as key individuals to interview. Augerot is serving on HOPE and also participated in the HOAC work. Napack and Maughan are on the HOPE board and also participated in the City Council actions.

Napack and Augerot indicated a willingness to answer questions. Ultimately they chose not to do so. Instead, they participated in a shared response of HOPE’s seven-person executive committee that was coordinated by Arena. Maughan did not respond.

“First, the HOPE executive committee wants to acknowledge that we share the community concerns on the topic of homelessness,” reads the first paragraph of the committee’s response. “We feel the frustration and pain. The status quo is not acceptable; we are in crisis mode. The board knows things have to change and improve. The board members all came together to



The new managed camp behind the men’s cold weather shelter is still unoccupied as organizers work to overcome the project’s challenges.

address the issue of homelessness because we care about it, too.”

See below for further comments from the HOPE response. The following is a look at the challenges for HOPE through a variety of lenses, including its own.

The witness

Maggie Cooper is a Corvallis physical therapist who has been a vocal and consistent critic of the impact of the homeless situation on downtown business owners. She has testified numerous times at a wide range of public meetings.

At the Jan. 27 HOPE board meeting Cooper questioned who should have made the decision on the Unity Shelter managed camp authorized by the City Council.

“I was surprised at the City Council’s action,” Cooper said. “It shouldn’t have happened the way that it did. Unity should have put their proposal to the HOPE board. Twenty-four people got a lot of money, and everyone else got nothing.”

“I was very hopeful about the HOPE Advisory Board,” she said in a lengthy email exchange. “I liked the two-tier structure, wide diversity of membership of citizen volunteers (and) intergovernmental coordination between city and county. I thought having a single organization which would take a broad view and decide on duplication of services, siloed groups and funding decisions would make the process more logical and fair as well as more resistant to manipulation by special interest groups or political interests.

“I liked that this group would be the ones making recommendations to funding bodies, specifically the City Council and Benton County Commissioners.”

Other pieces of the HOPE puzzle were less palatable.

“For the business people and neighbors this current round of data gathering feels profoundly discouraging,” she said, adding that she and her colleagues provided data and ideas to a wide range of groups from 2015 to 2020.

“Apparently, none of that matters because now HOPE wants us to do it all over again. Surveyed again ... and then ignored. And again ... only to be ignored. And then surveyed again ... oh, wait for it ...yes, ignored as usual. The business people I spoke with have a consistent response: ‘If you don’t want to hear what we have to say, why do you keep asking us our opinion?’”

The length of the process also has produced frustration, Cooper said.

“I have been listening to people quietly ask when this group is going to do something beyond talking hypothetically since September 2020. They have had (a dozen) meetings. I tried the excuse of ‘COVID put us behind in our process’ and got unanimously negative

responses. People felt that if they had to shift gears on short notice and then deliver, HOPE should be able to do so as well.”

The mayor

Traber says that HOPE’s role is pretty clear.

“First, make recommendations to City Council and county commissioners on policy and funding related to dealing with homelessness,” he said. “Second, these recommendations are to be based on an overall community plan to address homelessness. Third, this plan is in turn built on broad community input and insight derived from both a broad HOPE board membership and their expertise as well as strong outreach. Finally, HOPE will facilitate coordination among the various service providing organizations and agencies working on the solution consistent with the plan.”

And the recommendations, Traber said, are just that.

“It is still the council’s job to actually decide what policy to put in place. This is also true for the commission,” he said. “The question raised by Maggie Cooper missed this distinction. HOPE can make funding recommendations but only the council or commission can actually make the funding decisions.”

Traber also said he sees organizational aspects that will make HOPE improve on the efforts of its predecessors.

“I see a couple of key structural differences between HOPE and HOAC which will make it more effective,” he said. “First, both the council and the commission have actively endorsed their desire to receive recommendations from HOPE. Second, HOPE is structurally an advisory board of both decision bodies, putting it in a stronger position than either HOAC or HOC before it. Both those organizations were simply external community groups.”

The safety net

Hass-Holcombe, HOPE board member yet fiercely independent social service provider, sees some of the same signs of déjà vu as Cooper.

“The city is back to raising the traditional questions,” said Hass-Holcombe. “How much time? How much money? Should services to bad actors be withheld? (maybe they will change their behavior). And the traditional excuse/falsehood that for a city our size we are doing way more than we should/need to.”

She also had a take on the blueprint for HOPE.

HOPE BOARD MEMBERS

Here, in alphabetical order is a look at the HOPE Advisory Board members and their affiliations. * indicates Executive Committee Members

Florence Anderson: mobilizes volunteers for weekly visits to homeless camps with the Street Outreach and Response Team (SORT) to collect data with the VISPDAT in Corvallis. Member of the faith community.

Lennox Archer: Artist and former professor of English as a second language, with firsthand experience of homelessness in Corvallis.

Xan Augerot*: Benton County Commissioner

Catherine Biscoe: Philomath city councilor. Program manager, Philomath Community Gleaners. Board member for Philomath Community Services. Lived experience with homelessness.

Karyle Butcher: chair of the League of Women Voters, Corvallis, Housing Committee.

Bruce Butler: Chief executive officer of InterCommunity Health Network and Samaritan Health Plans.

Bryan Cotter: U.S. Army veteran, firefighter/EMT for the Corvallis Fire Department since 2015.

Anita Earl: Homeless outreach program supervisor with Samaritan Health. Manages Samaritan’s homeless medical respite bed.

Joel Goodwin: Corvallis Police Department captain. Participates in the Homeless Livability Panel to facilitate dialogue between homeless community and law enforcement.

George Grosch: Volunteer at the men’s cold weather homeless shelter. Spent five terms on the Corvallis City Council.

Barbara Hanley: Public health researcher, doctoral candidate in the OSU College of Public Health. Lived experience with homelessness.

Aleita Hass-Holcombe: Volunteer board president of the Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center.

Nicole Hobbs: AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with the Marys River Watershed Council.

Christina Jancila*: Downtown Corvallis business owner. Master’s recipient specializing in policy, administration and community. Worked at a transitional homeless shelter before moving to Corvallis in 2016.

Charles Maughan*: Corvallis Ward 2 city councilor.

Pegge McGuire*: Acting director at Community Services Consortium.

Jim Moorefield*: Retired after a 40-year career in human services, community development, and affordable housing, including 20 years as executive director of Willamette Neighborhood Housing Services, now DevNorthwest).

Andrea Myhre: Executive director of Corvallis Housing First.

Jan Napack*: Corvallis Ward 1 city councilor

Reece Stotsenberg*: long time Corvallis resident, parent, business owner, and “Corvallis homeless solutions” Facebook group host. Had a close family member experience chronic homelessness in multiple West Coast cities. Member of the West Hills Neighborhood Association.

Reverend Linda Tucker: Lead pastor of Corvallis First United Methodist Church, the location of the Room at the Inn women’s shelter.



JAMES DAY, MID-VALLEY MEDIA (FILE, 2018)

Aleita Hass-Holcombe, who runs the Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center, testifies while dressed in black at the Aug. 20, 2018 City Council meeting. Hass-Holcombe said she was in “mourning” because her social service agency was being forced to look for a new home.

HOMELESS TIMELINE

2007: A steering committee for the Benton County 10-year-plan to address homelessness begins meeting.

Oct. 23, 2009: The plan, called “A Ten-Year Plan to Address Issues Surrounding Housing and Homelessness In Benton County Oregon,” is rolled out. Included is the requirement that an “oversight committee” be formed.

Jan. 27, 2016: The final meeting of the Homeless Oversight Committee is held as the group morphs into the Housing Opportunities Action Council (HOAC). The group begins meeting the following month.

Nov. 1, 2016: Shawn Collins takes the position as project manager for the Housing Opportunities Action Council. Collins, a United Way employee, is paid by the city of Corvallis and Benton County.

Dec. 20, 2017: The HOAC governing board approves a mid-point update of the 10-year plan and releases its 64-page plan, “Community Strategies to Overcome Homelessness and Barriers to Housing.”

May 7, 2018: Shawn Collins of the Housing Opportunities Action Council, Sara Ingle of the Stone Soup meal service and Aleita Hass-Holcombe of the Corvallis Daytime Drop-in Center unveil to the Gazette-Times their proposal to co-locate the men’s cold weather homeless shelter and the other two services at a property on Southwest Second Street. Corvallis Mayor Biff Traber, chair of the HOAC, briefs the City Council that night. Councilors greet the news positively, although fierce opposition, particularly among downtown business owners, springs up almost immediately.

June 4, 2018: The Corvallis City Council tentatively passes a \$154 million budget that includes \$60,000 for the men’s cold weather shelter. Twenty-four of the 27 residents who speak during the public hearing address the shelter/co-location plan, with 14 backing it and 10 favoring alternatives. The city funding is expected to be matched by the county.

June 14, 2018: Amid concerns over the impact of the Second Street site on downtown businesses the Benton County Board of Commissioners “decides” not to provide its \$60,000. The issue was not on the agenda for the meeting, no formal vote was taken and no members of the public were in the board room.

July 2, 2018: The Corvallis City Council meets for 5½ hours before 300 people at the Majestic Theatre, hearing from Collins of HOAC on his plan. Plans for two other sites, one at the old Flomatcher plant across the Willamette River and the other at the corner of Walnut and Belvue, also were presented. More than 30 residentstestify. No decision is made on the shelter funding.

July 10, 2018: More than 90 people pack the county board room as the three plans are pitched to the Board of Commissioners. July 17 is set as the decision date.

July 13, 2018: Amid neighborhood opposition to the Walnut-Belvue Site, backer Rick Carone pulls the plan and proposes using the old Hanson Tire Factory building on Southeast Chapman Place as a “temporary” shelter location while he continues to work on the northern plan. Hanson was used during the 2017-18 shelter season.

July 16, 2018: The Corvallis City Council on a 5-4 vote allocates the \$60,000 in funding to the Second Street site, with Mayor Biff Traber, who only votes to break ties, casting the deciding vote.

July 17, 2018: The Benton County Board of Commissioners votes 3-0 to award \$60,000 to the Second Street group.

July 18, 2018: Catherine Mater, who backs the Flomatcher site, tells the Gazette-Times that efforts to oppose the Second Street site will continue and that legal action might be undertaken.

Aug. 6, 2018: The Corvallis City Council votes not to reconsider funding the Second Street site, with Traber again breaking the 4-4 tie.

Aug. 16, 2018: Carone and Jill McAlister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis, the fiscal agent for the operations of the shelter, announce that the shelter is moving back to the Hanson site. Carone buys the property from Devco Engineering for approximately \$1.5 million. The deal only includes housing the shelter at Hanson, forcing Stone Soup to retain the use of two area churches for its operations and leaving the drop-in center ... homeless.

Aug. 20, 2018: The Corvallis City Council votes 9-0 to reallocate its \$60,000 to the Hanson site. “I’m in mourning,” said drop-in center coordinator Aleita Hass-Holcombe, who was dressed in black and wearing a veil. “It feels like the drop-in center and Stone Soup have been thrown under the bus.”

Sept. 7, 2018: Ari Basil-Wagner of Greater Oregon Behavioral Health Inc., is hired by the city and county to assist in facilitating an effort to find common ground on the homeless issue. Basil-Wagner, who previously had worked with the county on a criminal justice assessment, is to be paid \$22,500, with the city and county splitting the tab.

Sept. 26, 2018: Basil-Wagner starts work by meeting with the governing board of HOAC. A four-hour retreat is held Oct. 25, with a third session taking place Nov. 28.

Nov. 6, 2018: Traber is overwhelmingly re-elected to a second four-year term. His major challenger was four-term Ward 2 Councilor Roen Hogg, who opposed the Second Street plan. Also, Charles Maughan, community manager for an affording housing facility and a Second Street backer, comfortably defeated Mater in the race to replace Hogg in his ward.

Thanksgiving Day (Nov. 22, 2018): The drop-in center moves into new quarters on Southwest Fourth Street. The building housed the men’s cold weather shelter during a controversial four-year run from 2013-17. Downtown property owner Hugh White and his wife Elizabeth bought the building for approximately \$500,000.

May 22, 2019: HOAC holds its final meeting as the group morphs again into a Benton County advisory committee. The new Home, Planning, Opportunity and Equity Advisory Board (HOPE) meets for the first time Dec. 9, 2019.



ANDY CRIFE, MID-VALLEY MEDIA

Jason McCauley is shown during an interview Tuesday near the skatepark tent city where he has lived for approximately a year.

Homeless

From A6

“HOPE’s role is not to do initiatives,” she said. “As much as I personally see myself as a doer, my role on the HOPE board is different. Unfortunately, HOPE’s recommendations may not result in seeing much doing. Thinking optimistically, however, I hope for many positive outcomes from our recommendations.”

Hass-Holcombe is quick to challenge some of the conventional wisdom on camping.

“Tent camping continues to be something (the City Coiuncil wishes) would go away,” she said. “Unfortunately, tent camping is always going to be a survival response for a good number of folks experiencing poverty for whatever reason.

“On a continuum of shelter, rough camping has always held a place. Although it makes many Corvallis residents uncomfortable and visually affects our sensitivities there will be rough camping. The bottom line is that providing for managed camping addresses safety concerns for everyone.

“As for HOPE recommending managed camping the data does not support the creation of managed camping as an acceptable transitional living option. In other parts of the world what is acceptable shelter (tents seem fine for refugee folks) is more inclusive.”

Hass-Holcombe also sees ... hope, but hope tempered by political realities.

“With every iteration of structures that have been created to address plans to end homelessness there has been positive outcomes,” she said. “Whether or not HOPE will be more successful than HOAC ... I think the jury is still out. Regarding key structural/ bylaw differences ... changes of these on paper do not, in my experience, make much difference.

“What will make a difference is the receptivity of those in power who receive the recommendations. Political will has to be more than lip service. The priority to make huge investments for basic human rights is what is needed here.”

The council speaks

The City Council met in a work session Feb. 4 to discuss “council policies regarding houseless services.” The session came nearly two months after their decision to set up the managed camping facility and operate an RV camp at Pioneer Park. The HOPE board came up a lot. Here is a sampling of councilor comments:

Maughan: “I think we need to be cautious about our expectations of HOPE. In HOPE’s defense, although they don’t really need it, they have been delayed by COVID. They are almost at the point of making recommendations. The City Council has been in a reactive mode. We’re not where we want to be. I’m hoping HOPE will provide some good direction on where we want to be.”

Andrew Struthers (Ward 9): “My expectations of HOPE center on its long-term policy focus. We had to make some hard decisions, but they were short-term decisions. Should we form an ad-hoc council group to look at council policies? It’s kind of a chicken/egg situation. Let’s define what we are looking for.”

Laurie Chaplen (Ward 6): “I’m very much looking forward to seeing what HOPE’s policies are coming forward.” Chaplen also suggests a regional solution that would include Linn County and Lincoln County.”

Charlyn Ellis (Ward 5): “We had two organizations in the past and just when you got to the point where they were going to do something it all kind of fell apart. I really don’t want this to happen to HOPE. We ended up in Pioneer Park and that’s not the best place for us to be.” Ellis argues against an ad-hoc group or task force.

Gabe Shepherd (Ward 4): “I agree with Councilor Ellis on the task force. It should come before the full City Council. We should have everyone in the room every step of the way. I don’t know if we’re the ones who should reach out on the regional model. We already have the county connection with HOPE.” Shepherd also says that any outreach on what other communities are doing should include Eugene.

Chaplen: Recommends excluding Eugene. Maughan: “I agree that Eugene’s finances are different than ours, but we still should look at how they are spending their money. The questions we are considering require knowledge we don’t have yet. That’s where HOPE comes in. We need more data on families. Where should families go (for shelter)? Who should we be helping?”

Struthers: “I agree on the task force. I was just brainstorming. I like the idea of the regional plan, but everything has to be done the right way. Everybody has to buy in.”

Ed Junkins (Ward 8): “The challenge is so difficult. We’re working with people with substance abuse and mental health issues plus the challenges of affordable housing and the judicial system. We have looked at the problem for the entire time I’ve been on the council here.” Junkins also backs the regional approach. “For efficiency”

Nowhere during the discussion is the impact of a “regional approach” on HOPE brought up. If it takes HOPE, the third city-county board to address homelessness, 12 meetings to get to the cusp of recommendations ... how much more time would a three-county group require?

At the skatepark

During a tour of homeless camps for this story the reporter and photographer stopped to talk with a group on a park bench next to the skatepark.

The area, both city land and ODOT property, contains dozens of tents, most of them clustered under the concrete supports for the Highway 34 bypass. A skater was swooping through the concrete bowls of the skate park and he had a boombox going to provide a soundtrack.

Three men were gathered around a dying fire that looked like a remnant from a Dickens novel. One small chunk of wood was still burning.

We meet Jason McCauley, 40. He says he has been on the streets for the past five years. He points to the tent under the bypass where he has lived since the pandemic hit. He moved to the tent because COVID reduced the capacity of the men’s shelter, which lies a few hundred yards down the bike path.

McCauley is asked about the work of government groups such as the city and HOPE. How does he hear about service for the homeless?

“I have no idea,” he said. “There is no communication. I have no phone. I would love to join your team. I’ve been out here for five years now.”

He says he mainly hears about services for the homeless “by word of mouth. I don’t really talk to any officials unless you’re a cop. And they don’t give any advice. Instead of hassling the homeless they should be ‘OK, these are the resources.’ But where am I going to go, to the drop-in center to get peanut butter every day of my life?”

The gentleman sitting next to McCauley on the bench tries to participate in the interview, but his speech patterns are too difficult to decipher. The third person in the group is bent over the fire while sitting on the seat of a walker with a dark hoodie over his head. He is shivering. He does not look up during our visit.

HOPE’s response

“These responses were written and approved by the HOPE executive committee made up of seven board members tasked with agenda setting, media responses, and communicating policy recommendations to the city and county,” reads the email introduction to the HOPE response. Lightly edited sections of the email follow.

Hope’s role: “This board has met only 12 times and is tasked with being data driven, looking at the whole system, promoting racial and ethnic justice, prioritizing community safety and vulnerable populations, and involving the whole community before making policy, planning, or funding recommendations.

The city’s actions: “If the HOPE board had completed its plan and it had been approved by the city and county the council and staff might have had a better sense for the relative role for managed tent and vehicle camping versus microshelter strategies, and a sense for time-bounds of short-term COVID strategies and long-term investments in the continuum of transitional to permanent housing”

Should HOPE provide services? “No, the HOPE board does not play an active role in provision of services. The board’s role is to develop the community vision for a continuum of housing services, and we can estimate order of magnitude costs for a recommendation. It is not our role to develop budgets for specific projects. If we call for managed camping as part of the continuum, then in the ideal world we would have multiple organizations that could propose implementation projects. But it would be up to the funder (city, county, state or private) to select the operator. The intent, as we move forward, is that HOPE might play a coordinating role for city and county funding. However, it does not have that authority at this time.”

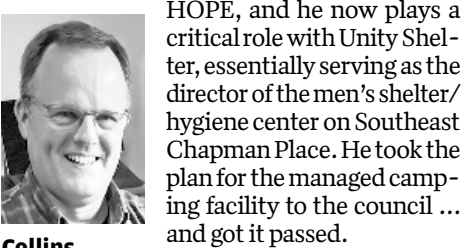
On delays in its work: “It would have been great to get here sooner, but between March and June, the city and county were focused on the COVID response. Everyone has been frustrated with the toll this pandemic has taken on normal workload and pace. It would have been impossible to expedite the HOPE board’s work during this time, and it would have stunted the process of involving the community in formulating policy recommendations.

“Once we have a vision and a plan, we will be able to recruit additional funders. We are getting there, but it takes time and a lot of listening.”

Councilor Napack added in a separate note to the newspaper: “There is so much we need to do. The challenge is to stay focused and on track.”

The project manager

Shawn Collins has played a key role in the homeless fight. Hired in November 2016 after a research management career at HP Inc., Collins served as the project manager for HOAC, worked for Benton County to help facilitate the transition from HOAC to



Collins

HOPE, and he now plays a critical role with Unity Shelter, essentially serving as the director of the men’s shelter/hygiene center on Southeast Chapman Place. He took the plan for the managed camping facility to the council ... and got it passed.

The camping site between the shelter building and the BMX Park is fenced, has a warming hut and platforms for the tents. But they tents aren’t up yet, and no campers have moved in. Collins originally hoped to have the operation running by mid-January, but funding issues, hiring staff and insurance snags have slowed the timeline.

Patience always is a key ingredient in the homeless battle.

Collins admits that he has a “unique vantage point” with which to view the changing dynamics of the problem.

Collins chose not to comment when asked about the transition to HOPE, only issuing this statement: “The bylaws are fairly specific as to the role and authority HOPE has and there are likely many factors that drove the approach HOPE has taken so far which are beyond my view.”

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