
Coastal Voices: Lots we can do locally on homeless issue

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Many folks have contacted me and asked me what is my solution in addressing the so-called homeless conditions in Del Norte County. Stating many times, I believe there can be no solution until services are mandatory and compulsory. Simply stated, one cannot live out in the bushes; it is dangerous, unhealthy to the camper and to the public and speaks poorly of a society which strives to offer real help to those truly in need.

During public comments, I addressed the city council at the June 3 meeting with my concerns, which go way beyond sleeping and resting. Many other articulate speakers followed and addressed the council expressing frustration with inaction based on a threatening letter of a possible lawsuit from the American Civil Liberties Union, Northern California office, if the council dared to act on proposed ordinances addressing camping, dog leash laws and sleeping in RV's on public streets.

The councilors blinked and the proposed ordinances remain tabled. It is disheartening to realize the ACLU can intimidate the council and essentially paralyze government action to address some very serious behaviors: public urination, public defecation, open drug and alcohol abuse, disturbing the peace and other related illegal and anti-social behaviors which discourage locals and visitors from utilizing Beachfront Park, Howe Drive and Battery Point Lighthouse.

To its credit the council did adopt a compromised ordinance 807, restricting public street parking of RV's to a maximum of eight hours before moving the vehicle 1,000 feet. The failure to act on the remaining ordinances addressing camping on public property, dog leash/licensing laws, and sleeping in recreational vehicles remains unresolved to date.

I share the opinion of letter writer Penny Fleming who correctly identifies these folks who camp out in Beachfront Park, barbecue pits and Howe Drive as the "... town's garbage producers," and other labels not very complimentary. I concur with Fleming 100 percent and would also question if these individuals are indeed homeless or selfishly hiding behind this ugly behavior some wish to boldly display, which goes way beyond "resting and sleeping."

Citizen Eileen Cooper offered a great idea: utilize a homeless staging area on Williams Drive on the vacated McCarthy School site. This location satisfies the appeals court decision to provide basic shelter and removes those who live in a style which is unsafe and illegal from our beautiful parks and iconic tourist spots.

The vacant McCarthy bungalows would need some refurbishing with cots, showers and toilet facilities but the costs would be modest compared to some of the other options I heard about. This property is located within city limits; however, the county and school district should have a say in how to activate this location.

The alternative remains grim. Doing nothing will further deteriorate conditions and will continue to discourage our visitors and locals alike from enjoying the most beautiful areas of the city. Summer is upon us and if local governments sit on their hands waiting for Sacramento to render assistance, I fear our community will be waiting a very long time. There is a lot we can do, locally.

Roger Gitlin is a Del Norte County supervisor.