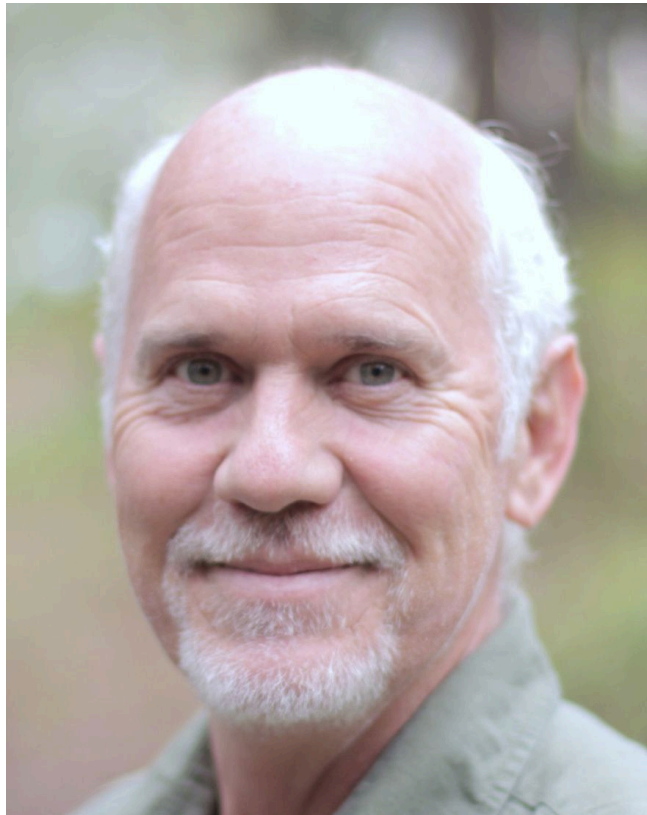

Guest Column: All People Need Homes

April 16, 2022



Last week, I attended the Town Hall meeting on Housing and the Homeless held by State Senator Mike McGuire. This provided a wealth of information on what California is doing to address the housing crisis.

The most obvious statement of the evening was from a speaker who said, “There is only one solution for homelessness and that is housing.”

In the next eight years, 2.5 million new housing units will be needed in California. The state has begun addressing this shortfall, which goes far beyond helping the 161,000 who are currently homeless. This is about ensuring all people have affordable housing.

Some people prefer to demonize the homeless as a caricature of a drug-crazed, mentally ill criminal that is beyond redemption. Some want to lock them up or move them out of town. If you think of the homeless as unwanted refuse of our society, it’s easier not to care.

It’s important to understand who the homeless people really are. Most unhoused people didn’t come from somewhere else. They are from this community and have simply fallen on hard times.

The largest segment of our unhoused population are women with children and women over 65. Many are veterans. Most do not choose to be homeless, but they are forced into it due to a lack of alternatives.

In most cases they are homeless because they cannot afford to rent a home. There is a serious lack of affordable rental housing and not enough is being done locally to address this. The State is providing funding to help, but communities and local government must also do their part.

Project Home Key is a state program that provides funding to convert hotels and motels into permanent or interim housing. This comes with three years of wraparound services that can help people return to mainstream society, including mental health services, addiction treatment and employment preparation.

Project Home Key has funded and completed one local project that has provided housing for 17% of our local unhoused population. This is a start.

We need to address the causes of our affordable housing shortage. Local government can set policies that address these issues. For example, the reduction of affordable housing has been exacerbated by the increasing number of properties that have been converted from rental properties to vacation rentals. These conversions have a significant impact on both the price and availability of housing in our community.

If you cannot muster compassion for the suffering of our poor people, then know this. It is much more expensive to do nothing. The cost of emergency response services is significant, and includes law enforcement, emergency health care and social services. It is more cost effective to help the homeless people stabilize their lives, find gainful employment, and return to being tax-paying citizens.

We can help homeless people break out of the cycle of hopelessness, by providing stable affordable housing first, then helping them address their other challenges.

We can do better.