

## Homeless-serving groups get together

By Julie Akins / For the Tidings

Posted Apr 22, 2016 at 6:50 PM

Updated Apr 22, 2016 at 6:50 PM

More than 17 groups with a stated mission of helping those in poverty and on the homeless spectrum packed the Ashland City Council Chambers Thursday to meet-face to-face at the request of Mayor John Stromberg.

After introducing themselves and their mission — which took roughly 90 minutes — they left with no definite plans to meet again after having had no specific discussions about the problem or solutions. But that was not the intention. The idea was to get in front of each other and see what might come from the interaction for the future.

“You may move forward as you are inspired and see fit,” Mayor Stromberg told the group.

Agencies from Goodwill to Wellness for Everyone, the group which feeds community members at Railroad Park, talked about their mission in assisting the poor and homeless. There was no public testimony and no members from the homeless community joined the table.

“This was more about those serving the community,” said Bob Morris from the Ashland Culture of Peace Commission, who attended the round table — but he opined it would be worth considering in future meetings, saying, “It’d be good to have people from the homeless community have a direct voice.”

Morris and David Wick, also from the Peace Commission, suggested smaller working groups coming together prior to another full meeting. But no specific plans were made. Both agreed it was their intention to set up future meetings.

The round table comes in the wake of Stromberg’s discussion at a council meeting last month when proposals to control “downtown behavior” were introduced. Ashland city staff reported receiving complaints about aggressive panhandling and blocking sidewalks.

The mayor said that regulating behavior is an inadequate approach to a growing number of people who are now homeless up and down the I-5 corridor due to increasing home prices, fewer rental vacancies and low wages. He suggested a working group figure out longer term solutions.

This meeting was born out of that idea.

However, the council on Tuesday passed an ordinance to ban aggressive panhandling (defined as approaching people within 20 feet of an ATM or financial institution or sitting at cafes both inside and outside). The council also preliminarily passed rules prohibiting obstructing sidewalks six feet from the curb or city structures or blocking entrances or exits.

In March the council voted to hire four part time police cadets to work specifically in the downtown area during tourist season, as well as authorizing \$73,000 for jail beds, although Police Chief Tighe O'Meara was clear that violators of those ordinances would not face jail time.

The council on Monday considered options for affordable housing in a study session but came to no conclusions. That discussion will continue in future council meetings, according to Mayor Stromberg.

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