

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL
Dana Brown-Davis, C.M.C.

COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Suite #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010



COUNCILMEMBERS
Rud Browne
Barry Buchanan
Tyler Byrd
Todd Donovan
Ben Elenbaas
Carol Frazey
Kathy Kershner

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL

Homeless Strategies Workgroup

Friday, February 5, 2021

Meeting #37 MEETING SUMMARY

Time: 1:30 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Location: Remote online meeting, for more information visit

Members in Attendance:

Barry Buchanan, Chair, Whatcom County Councilmember
Rud Browne, Whatcom County Councilmember
Michael Lilliquist, Bellingham City Council Member
Seth Fleetwood, City of Bellingham, Mayor
Riley Sweeney, City of Ferndale
Michael Shepard, Port of Bellingham, Commissioner
Hans Erchinger-Davis, Lighthouse Mission Ministries Representative
Teri Bryant for Mike Parker, Opportunity Council Representative
Ann Beck, Whatcom County Health
Jason McGill, Northwest Youth Services Representative
Florence Simon, Bellingham Police, Deputy Chief
Mike Hilley, Whatcom County EMS
Markis D. Stidham, Homeless Advocate
Joel Kennedy, Homeless children and families
Emily O'Connor, Homeless children and families
Michael Berres, Special populations
Lisa Marx, Schools

(12 members constitute a quorum)

1. Welcome, HSW Chair, Whatcom County Councilmember Barry Buchanan

Councilmember Buchanan welcomed members, including new member Jason McGill (NWYS). Member approved the Meeting Summary: Meeting 36 – January 22, 2021. The next meeting is Friday, February 19, 2021; 1:30pm.

HSW Members passed a motion to confirming a voting rule indicating that a majority to pass a vote is:

- A majority of those present and participating in the vote, as long as there is a sufficient quorum to be taking a vote.

Michael Berres moved and Emily O'Connor seconded

2. Scope and Purpose of HSW, Anne Deacon

Anne Deacon discussed the purpose of the Homeless Strategies Workgroup. The initial establishment of the group in 2017 to review the siting of a 200-bed low barrier shelter. In 2019, the HSW regrouped to identify additional temporary winter shelters, added capacity for year-round shelters, additional opportunities to address the needs of the community's homeless population and strategies to prevent people from having no other option but to sleep outside.

Anne Deacon continued to discuss recent accomplishments including:

- Basecamp 200 bed shelter
- Laundry and shower facilities at Basecamp
- Tiny home shelters
- City of Bellingham has an RFQ out to expand tiny home shelters.
 - o Mayor Fleetwood discussed work with Road 2 Home and LIHI to operate a tiny home encampment at a location to be determined, funded by the City, and anticipated opening in May for 40 beds (a year-round shelter).
- Time limited committee identified policies and procedures for Severe Weather Shelters (different from overflow shelters), including criteria for when to open severe weather shelters. (A separate Committee, not the Task Force, identified policies and procedures for Severe Weather Shelters) *[This is a correction of what was said during the meeting]*
- Last year severe weather shelters were established for families, women, and other special groups. These severe weather shelters last year were not filled to capacity.
- This year there was a significant challenge finding volunteers to staff shelters due to concerns of COVID transmission.
- RFQ for safe parking by City of Bellingham this year – no respondents.
- Partners providing shelter:
 - o Lighthouse Mission Ministries
 - o Faith-based organizations: Fountain Community Church, Garden Street United Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Christ the King, Northwest Youth Services,
 - o YWCA
 - o Sun Community Services
 - o DVSAS
 - o Opportunity Council
 - o Homes Now
 - o Interfaith Coalition
- City of Bellingham and County have contributed funds for operations and supplies as well as staff time for planning efforts.
- Many partners work to get people into motels (Lydia Place, Opportunity Council)
- All of the housing providers have a role in housing unsheltered community (Mercy, Housing Authority, Opportunity Council) – they set aside beds for people exiting homelessness, approximately 10% are homeless on entry.

Anne Deacon clarified that the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee is focused on permanent housing solutions. The Homeless Strategies Workgroup is focused specifically on shelter.

HSW members discussed general goals for HSW, including the following:

- County's role in ending homelessness is focused on permanent supportive housing, and there are some roles the County won't do (e.g. recommend to buy a hotel and house people there without rules);
- Don't let people die;
- Purchase more tiny homes and set them up in a congregant area, typically several villages on a large lot with central services (kitchen, bathrooms, amenities);
- Reliance on severe weather shelters are going to fail every year unless we have winter shelters that then overflow capacity is accommodated with a severe weather shelter;

- Focus again on identifying capital projects to add permanent capacity to the system (moderate sized facilities with focus and expertise to provide better service and assistance). Size should be focused on service rather than efficiency of staff, e.g. 25 to 50;
- Smaller sheltering groups for seniors, medically fragile, crisis families, smaller shelters for working adults (higher barrier, transitional housing) without challenges with mental health or addiction;
- Challenges with looking at HSW priorities without understanding the resources available to allocate to sheltering;
- The best way to address the needs of unhoused neighbors is to house them;
- Interim housing for families with children, a trauma-informed facility;
- Unless we make big investments in solutions like more rapid rehousing, more interim housing, we will constantly be behind;
- Balance near and long-term needs;
- HSW roles are to advise (make recommendations to) the County Council, serve as a forum to coordinate among different jurisdictions, and hear from the public to better identify the problems and solutions;
- Focus on families with children, as motels aren't ideal for kids and they are expensive and funds could be better spent on a facility;
- Redefine emergency sheltering- during an emergency (pandemic)
- Field work on the street to build bridges and connect people to services;
- Establish targets for what types of shelters and how many beds we need;
- Review annually the criteria for severe weather shelters and make changes as needed;
- Affirmation from County Council to do the work in the HSW – send Council a work plan to approve;
- Specify short-term and long-term activities.

HSW members discussed the campers (Camp 210), including:

- What location would be suitable to them for shelter,
- What we expect will happen with the campers,
- What were the City's experiences working with advocates for campers from Camp 210.
- It seems to be in the purview of HSW to also think about alternatives other than bricks and mortar, and
- Campers want a large lot with 4 villages and a central services area for kitchen/bathroom.

Councilmember Buchanan discussed an update that an additional site is in the works. Homes Now can take on a third site in about 2 weeks. Twenty shelter units (8x12) will be delivered in approximately 2 weeks.

Commissioner Shepherd made a motion (seconded by Buchanan) to encourage the City of Bellingham to identify an operator for a shelter site at the Cornwall property that the Port made available (*includes a time restriction: concurrent with pandemic emergency*)

- Motion passes (16 yes, 1 no, 1 abstention)

Anne Deacon reviewed overarching ideas the HSW wants to look at

- More tiny homes (short term)
- Specialty shelters (long term)
- Interim housing for families with children (long-term)
- Communications (short term)

- Health and medical issues (short term)
- More qualitative data to determine how to move forward. Also look at Point-In-Time count.

HSW members discussed the ability to use the Byron Street Isolation and Quarantine facility for people experiencing homelessness. After evaluating this option, the result was to put more money into motel stays and not use Byron Street as a homeless shelter.

Anne Deacon described currently operating forums including the Whatcom Coalition to End Homelessness and the Whatcom County Housing Advisory Committee, which is guided by the Plan to End Homelessness. HSW members discussed clarifying the role of the HSW and how HSW can coordinate with other efforts already underway.

Markis Stidham made a motion (Michael Berres seconded) that the HSW recommend to the County Council to buy 50 additional tiny homes with the understanding that there is no identified site, operator, or program for those tiny homes (*but that we believe they can be identified in the future*).

- Motion fails: 7 yes, 5 no, 2 abstain

Anne Deacon discussed the process for the HSW moving forward, including:

- work in governments is done by staff who can bring more information to HSW meetings, and
- HSW members can find out more by attending partner meetings, such as the homeless coalition.

HSW members discussed

- an interest in learning more about the work being done in our community,
- keeping the HSW charter as narrow as possible (e.g. adding shelter capacity),
- finding a solution that is acceptable to the whole community or it won't stand the test of time,
- community healing that needs to happen as a result of the Camp 210 event.