

THE BARRE MONTPELIER



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Whitaker: Homeless need our help

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Really? It's too cold for Christmas caroling this past Friday night, but it's not too cold for humans to still be sleeping outside at minus 4 degrees?

We all need to do a reality check and admit that current programs-and-services status quo is not all right. Our fears and anxiety are impeding our essential human capacity for empathy from reaching those feelings for individuals most in need.

Yet, the Montpelier City Council this past Wednesday only heard the homelessness task force ask for three things:

- Wages (non-livable) for a part-time “street outreach” worker.
- A few plastic porta-john out-houses, unheated, of course, and clean-out services.
- Some lockers in town to secure sleeping bags and personal effects.

Alternatively, what about a small number of warm places to use the bathroom night or day, take a shower and some modest private shelters for those who don't “fit” into the undignified overflow shelter scheme? Better yet, retire the existing dysfunction.

What about using the small, inexpensive, insulated shelters, “Conestoga Huts” six in a cluster? Not located at some invisible, degenerate stump dump, but as parts of our community: in the Peace Park along the bike path behind Department of Liquor Control, at Gateway Park on West State Street near the interstate, in Hubbard Park or Sabin's Pasture and on Home Farm Road, where there is already water, sewer and bus service?

Convert another in-town building with respectable, private inexpensive sleeping pods for those who need more secure or supervised shelter with indoor plumbing, laundry and showers. Yestermorrow will likely help with the design/build using student labor.

Let's commit to the important local social services outreach to facilitating flexible employment for our showered, laundered and well-rested brethren. Let's work to restore hope, dignity and mental balance and offer frequent opportunity to shovel snow, pick up trash, build trails, grow produce for Agway and Dog River, clean city hall even.

Let's really get charitable this holiday season to ourselves and others in need. Count our blessings.

This is not rocket science. Expand your realm of what is near-term possible.

Demand that city and state officials get serious about solving this crisis, not sit on our laurels with some abstract "roadmap." Put \$50,000 into the city budget for homelessness solutions and a plan, then use that as matching funds to attract other monies from the housing trust fund, the community fund, state and national foundations, local citizens and businesses.

Stephen Whitaker lives in Montpelier.