

Don Kraher

From: Melissa Pino <melissawpino@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, May 17, 2021 1:37 PM
To: Don Kraher; Melissa Pino
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Public Input: Homelessness

THIS EMAIL IS FROM AN EXTERNAL EMAIL ACCOUNT

Dear Mr. Kraher, thank you for providing an avenue for public input on today's agenda topics. My comment on homelessness is below.

Best, Melissa Pino

In April 2019, Mayor Robinson and Commissioner May hosted a Homeless Summit that resulted in a good turnout of many stakeholders passionate about wanting to make a bigger difference. The PNJ quoted Mayor Robinson afterwards as saying that he thought "everybody walked out of here feeling better that we seem to have the coordination between all of us working together." He stated that Commissioner May had voiced that "he didn't want to waste another year doing nothing while a committee worked on a plan that would potentially never be implemented." Commissioner May voiced the need to work together: "If we combine resources together, we can be more efficient with resources." Mayor Robinson explained that the specific reason he wanted to hold the summit was "to see if there's support for a 'come as you are' shelter." Michael Kimberl, however, pointed out that, by his estimation, Pensacola didn't yet have the infrastructure in place to handle a "come as you are" shelter, and predicted that "If we don't have the infrastructure to take the referral out, that 'come as you are' shelter becomes a warehouse that stores our undesirables." At the summit, there were many fantastic ideas voiced by area experts on how, exactly, to implement closer connection between agencies. My comment as a layperson wanting to do more to help was that it was frustrating to navigate the various agencies, understand which agencies provide which services, and how they work together. I suggested a landing page online with the various agencies laid out and linked to their homepages, with a brief description of how the agency functioned on the landing page.

Over two years later—despite the best efforts of County and City staff and the heads of various groups—not much has changed. In fact, the "come as you are" shelter devolved into the feel-good band-aid of a day center, and the pressing problem of homelessness

seems to have gotten entwined with the separate issues of “affordable” housing, another pressing need, the solution for which seems to be primarily driven by developers.

A day center will not solve our homeless crisis. Affordable housing that isn’t really affordable will not solve our homeless crisis. Busting up homeless camps in the middle of a pandemic, contrary to CDC guidelines, will not solve our homeless crisis. Requiring our police to continue acting as de facto social workers will not solve our homeless crisis. And a lord of the flies scenario where various agencies are competing for a limited amount of funding, sometimes with the recipients a foregone conclusion, certainly will not solve our homeless crisis.

It’s time for honest conversations about desired outcomes and real solutions for all of them. Otherwise, two years from now our community will still be stuck in the same position, with a few people killing themselves to provide real results while a lot of money gets sucked away by bureaucracies, special interests, and cross purposes. The time seems ripe to bring everybody back to the table and talk about ALL the potential solutions; it shouldn’t require agreeing with the vision of the day center to gain access to planning, decision-making, and funding. This is an “and” challenge that can’t be addressed with one or two sole solutions. And we need to stop dancing around the fact that one real problem with homelessness in this area is that—imagine it--people simply do not have any other place to go. Of course it’s more complicated than that, but in what universe do we solve homelessness if there aren’t roofs and beds for those needing and wanting help?

--Melissa Pino