

Elderberry Commons issues should not be a surprise....

The issues with Elderberry commons were easily anticipated and should have been addressed before accepting the county action to transfer the hotel to Burbank.

Several recent public comments have asked what was going on with the repopulation of Elderberry Commons. We were promised originally it was going to be for vulnerable elderly. It was not a surprise that the county sent us prostitutes and drug addicts. This cuts the county's cost for dealing with these issues dramatically. The surprise is the council did not get ahead of the issues. The issues should have been anticipated.

The city and the City Council should feel like experts on the homeless situation. The City of Sebastopol purchased Park Village mobile home park in 2007. It was part of a larger 13-acre property that included a seasonal campground and was acquired as part of a long-term plan to develop a public park. In fact, the city just recently acknowledged for the first time, that it considers Park Village Sebastopol's first permanent supportive housing project.

An analysis I was able to do on police calls in 2020 at Park Village and the surrounding commercial areas showed almost identical police workload and issues in that facility 5 years ago.

Morris Street was also a mess. The whole county saw firsthand the issues caused by opening our city to people who are "unhoused". Constant drug use, drug dealing and prostitution and property crime were all part of that experience.

Improving that situation by moving select individuals to Horizon Shine with lots of good intentions turned out to be costly to the city and didn't really help anyone in the village. A couple of people left for family in other states and three people associated with the population died under suspicious circumstances or by suicide. Many failed in 2 years even to get their vehicle properly registered, which was almost the only goal of the project.

With the Gravenstein Commons proposal from SVdP came a consultant report intended to help the city council understand the risks of these kinds of projects. It outlined significant financial risks to the city, largely based on possibly unrealistic cost estimates by SVdP. This was the first project they built from scratch.

The consultant report and his presentation to the city council identified the fact that with a population of recently homeless people, come many issues. Some will be issues with selected residents and many more from friends, family members and others such as drug dealers who tend to gather at these sites.

This and past city councils have largely ignored the warnings and the city's own past experiences. Three of you voted to move forward with SVdP. The question now is where is that project at this time?

1. Who in the city is accountable for the city's Home Key grant at this time? Don was the only person remotely qualified and experienced with the homeless program in the county and Home Key requirements. There are significant financial penalties associated with not meeting the grant terms. The city council has never seen what those terms are in any public meeting. Anyone concerned?
2. A consultant selected and paid for by SVdP was the solution to the city not having expertise nor bandwidth to manage the project and SVdP. In spite of concerns about conflicts of interest in this arrangement there have been no public reports to the city council on who the consultant is and what decisions they are making on behalf of the city?
3. With another 30 or so newly homeless arriving at Gravenstein Commons on the opposite entrance to the city we can expect the same problems as Elderberry. What is the plan to fund substantial increases in police budgets to address the issues of our itinerant homeless population and now three permanent supportive housing projects in our little city. We have 9 officers (on a good day) and approximately 2 on each shift. If you need to increase staff, you will need to double the size of your police force. Already it is the largest budget line item. What is your long-term plan to add staff for the increasing issues facing the city now and when Gravenstein Commons opens?

The City Council needs to step up. There are no fences around these facilities. Individuals in need of certain goods are going to venture into businesses and residences in the city with a resulting increase in property crimes.

Drug dealers are not limited to just the parking lots at Park Village, Elderberry and Gravenstein Commons, they will like any entrepreneur seeking out new customers. Students at our local schools are vulnerable and easily accessible. It seems unlikely that there are no drug dealers in the Safeway parking lot today. The needle exchange co-located with the Youth health clinic at West County Community Health all but ensures our drug addicts and drug dealers and the city's youth have a common "safe" meeting place.