

Bend's Booming Homeless Population

by Kim Guice

Bend is booming and many are not surprised. After all, there are a myriad of things to appreciate about the Central Oregon region.

It boasts world-class skiing at Mt. Bachelor, the Deschutes River, hiking, biking, snowmobiling in the Deschutes national Forest, golf-courses galore, summer picnics and community events at Drake Park, fabulous fly fishing and then there is the growing homeless problem.

Like the landscape itself, it seems there is a growing contrast in the people as well.

Steve Esselstyn, community liaison for the Bend Police Department, says it only makes sense. With the increase in population one would expect to see an increasing gap.

He reports that it is something the police department has noticed. While there is no real increase attributable to the homeless in the area, the police are getting more complaints.

“There has been an increase in calls for unwanted or suspicious people,” he said. “Officers are seeing more calls for panhandlers.”

If they are on private property they have to move out, according to Esselstyn. However, there are no laws to prohibit people from sitting on a street corner with a sign.

That seems to be a sign of the times around Bend. “With over 70,000 people there is going to be the element of ultra rich and the ultra poor,” he said.

“You see a lot more BMWs and Cadillacs but you also see a lot more sleeping bags and bicycles,” Esselstyn added.

According to the Homeless Leadership Council, there are approximately 1,344 people living in the area that have no place to call home.

Those numbers are based on a 24-hour, "point-in-time" count conducted in January of 2006 in Deschutes, Jefferson and Crook Counties.

The count included homeless who were both "sheltered" and "unsheltered." This is the first time a count of this kind had been done in the tri-county area.

"The concentration is in the greater Bend area," said Corky Senecal, the supporting service manager for the Central Oregon Community Action Agency Network (COCAAN).

If that isn't shocking, Senecal points out a little known fact that 617 of the people that are homeless are under the age of 18.

"Forty percent of the people we identified were young people," Senecal said. "There are about 300-plus homeless kids in the Bend and Redmond school districts that go to school every day."

One place a handful of those teens turn to is Grandma's House. It is a safe, nurturing shelter for homeless or abused pregnant and parenting teen mothers between the ages of 12 and 19 years old.

"We are only one of two youth shelters," said Woody Medeiros of Grandma's House. "Some come from a good home during a crisis but a lot of them were born into a substandard life."

At Grandma's House, not only are they given safe shelter, they are given the chance to learn life skills and prepare to be a better parent.

Medeiros says something to note about the teens in their program is that they all come willingly. "They all go to school and they all come with a goal."

The girls all sign a contract when they enter the house. Like many homeless, they just need a helping hand and a chance.

At the core of the problem, according to the survey, is affordable housing.

“Forty-three percent say the reason they are homeless is because they couldn’t afford rent,” Senecal said.

While she acknowledges many things can come into play, from domestic to substance abuse, the greatest contributor to homelessness is lack of affordable homes.

Anyone in the housing market knows that the costs have grown exponentially.

According to data provided by realtor David Foster at DavidFoster.biz; by the end of 2005, the average sales price of homes was up 23 percent to \$334,570. The median price was \$279,900.

“Affordable” homes are becoming increasingly rare with few homes for less than \$200,000 and the median list price of homes on lots at \$394,095 and the average at \$545,040,” he said in his online report.

This is a problem that has been heading towards Bend for years. According to the report, between 1990 and 2000 housing prices more than doubled, while household income only grew by 58 percent.

“As the cost of housing outstrips the income in an area, you are going to end up with more and more homeless,” Senecal added.

One goal of the Homeless Leadership Council is to educate and break down the myths that surround those living without permanent homes.

“It’s more than the guy sitting in Cascade Village with a dog and his sign,” she said. “That is one face of homelessness, but not the only face.”

She said look around and chances are it is closer than you think. “I know kids who go to school every day who live in cars,” she said.

“I know there are people who brush their teeth or comb their hair in public bathrooms on their way to work,” Senecal added. “There is a good chance the guy who just pumped your gas or gave you your latte is homeless.”

Hundreds have jobs, hundreds go to school and more than a thousand can’t afford a place to sleep at each night.

“This is not an isolated problem. It is woven throughout the fabric of our community,” Senecal said. “It touches every person in our community, they just don’t know it.”

So, what is the solution? The first step is education. “We need to educate our community about the size and scope of the problem.”

Those in financial trouble also need to get educated about the services available to help them keep their homes.

“The ones that are a paycheck away, two paychecks away there isn’t a whole lot of help, but COCAAN has a rental assistance program,” Senecal said.

In addition, they offer an energy assistance program for people who are struggling, trying to decide which bill they are going to pay. “For some it can make a big difference,” she added.

For those who want to help, Medeiros and Senecal encourage people in the community to get involved.

There are volunteer opportunities, area shelters and services like COCAAN that need financial assistance and everyday household supplies donated.

To learn more about how to get involved, visit www.cohomeless.org.

