

Mocha Musings: Aghast at Senior Center changes

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Posted Sep 5, 2017 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 12, 2017 at 12:52 PM

“But how can that happen?” my friends who don’t live in Ashland are asking me. “That’s not the Ashland we know.” They are referring to the recent “recommendations” by the Ashland Parks & Recreation Commission to lay off the entire staff of the Senior Program (which is all-female and all seniors) and move several aspects of the program to The Grove, and to the recent APRC Commissioner meetings where the public comment was treated with disregard. “What community doesn’t take care of its disadvantaged elders?” they are asking me. “That’s just a given, a no-brainer. Especially in an affluent town like Ashland that sees itself as so progressive, inclusive and compassionate.” I sincerely hope that the public, young and old, is following the recent Letters to the Editor and articles in the Daily Tidings about the changes being put into place regarding our 43-year old senior program, which was originally designed to be a social service “safety net” for our lower-income senior population. The public comments have been unanimously opposed to these proposed changes.

Let's also look at the bigger picture for a moment: Within days of these "recommendations" becoming public, Michael Black, director of APRC, went before our Ashland City Council and mayor (with two council members absent) asking for \$235,000 to be paid to a Portland consultancy firm for a plan to map out the future of Lithia Park. So, we are told that the senior program, which came in under budget and is not designed to produce revenue, is too costly for APRC, but that they need to send a cool quarter of a million dollars to an out-of-town consulting firm to tell us what Lithia Park needs? "Who," my friends ask me, "is establishing the priorities for our fair cit

Our senior program may be the first neck on the chopping block under the axe of the Parks & Recreation Commission, but if you love Lithia Park for the jewel that it is, beware. Stay informed, and speak up.

Our senior program has helped countless elders in our town. When one elderly woman stopped coming to our lunch program, it was learned that she didn't have any money at all, as she had been the victim of identity fraud and her meager bank account had been cleaned out. The program director personally accompanied her to the bank, reestablished her account, and got the Ashland Police Department involved. There are so many stories like this, of people who have called or come into the office in tears, at wits' end, with nowhere else to turn. Poverty and lack of options are not always a result of bad choices. As anyone who has lived long enough and who has even an ounce of empathy knows, sometimes life just gives you one too many sucker punches, and can be especially cruel to those least

able to defend themselves. If, on top of that, there is no family to lean on or limited (or no) financial means, it can bounce you to the gutter and leave you there.

The actions by the APRC affecting our existing senior program, a program which took decades of hard work by dedicated staff to build, should now be thoroughly examined by our City Council and mayor.

There is a quote by French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin that says, “Growing old is like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven’t committed.” If that is so, then as a community is it not incumbent upon us to care for those who are less able, or no longer able, to care for themselves?

As I sit with my friends and we prepare to bring this evening of discussion to a close, they reflect on their experience of Ashland as that of an idyllic, enlightened tourist town.

“What would our society be if we didn’t care for our disenfranchised and elderly?” they ask. “What would we look like?” I have no answer for them, as they shake their heads in disappointment.

— Award-winning author, TV presenter and world traveler Susanne Severeid is an Ashland resident who enjoys making time for the important things in life — including mocha. Read more of her columns at bit.ly/adtssmm. For more, go to www.susannevereid.com. Email her at susannewebsite@olympen.com.