

Guest Opinion: Senior safety net is crucial

By Sue Wilson

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The Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission has approved plans to significantly re-organize the senior center services. There was almost no opportunity for community input. Now many seniors are protesting the plans.

A recent Daily Tidings editorial suggested that it made sense for the senior center to be in the recreation department since it includes recreational activities, and “why should senior activities be different?” What is not being adequately addressed is the social services/safety net which the senior center’s employees have provided seniors for over 40 years.

One of the first actions the APRC plans to take is to lay off current senior center staff who provide critical social services and a safety net, especially for disabled younger seniors and super seniors (80-plus) in need. The current experienced staff know the available community resources and are dedicated to monitor and follow up to ensure seniors’ needs are met. They know the seniors and their families.

The seniors using senior center services come from diverse backgrounds — retired teachers, engineers, child-care providers, veterans, clerks, etc. The older seniors' fixed incomes don't cover as much as they used to, they have outlived most of their friends, brothers and sisters, and many of their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have moved away or are busy with responsibilities. The seniors have hard-earned dignity and want to remain active and independent as their mobility becomes more limited. It takes time and trust for them to reach out for help or to participate in senior center activities to make new friends. APRC's recent actions have broken that trust and have caused stress.

APRC states the reason for the re-organization is that young seniors (55-plus) who are more able to pay fees for cost recovery purposes are not using the senior center. Yes, those young seniors may have more expendable income, yet they also may not be ready to think of themselves as seniors. Instead, many young seniors use the YMCA or private athletic/exercise companies. Should the city subsidize such services for young seniors? Should the city compete with private companies? (Note that the senior center currently specializes in gentle exercises, such as yoga and somatics, for older seniors.)

Also, APRC plans to move future senior center office employees to its main building at The Grove. It is critical to have such employees at the senior center as part of the seniors' safety net. For example, when a super senior who regularly attends meals/activities does not show up, it is noticed, discussed and followed up on to ensure the super senior is OK.

It appears that the mayor and City Council believe they cannot interfere with APRC's plans. At least the mayor and council should acknowledge that APRC's plans will lessen the effectiveness of the current social services and safety net for seniors when it lays off/fires the dedicated, experienced senior service employees in October. The city should also honor those employees for their longtime, dedicated service to the most vulnerable citizens in our community. Yet I have to ask, is this what the community really wants to do?

— *Sue Wilson lives in Ashland.*