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The Senior Center Decision – Behind the Scenes – Is Democracy Broken In Ashland?

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The Senior Center Decision – Behind the Scenes

“To secure the well-being of all Ashland residents.” For at least ten years, this has been a stated value and goal of the City of Ashland. Yet, on Wednesday, August 9th, the full Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission decided unanimously to adopt a series of steps which will have the effect of charging payment for, curtailing, and/or relocating services for our most vulnerable citizens, namely our seniors. Two full-time senior services employees were fired without notice.

Parks and Rec Commission Director Michael Black issued a memo outlining these plans on August 7th, allowing barely 24 hours for the public to learn about and respond to the plan. At a hastily called public meeting of the Parks and Rec Subcommittee on August 8th, over fifty citizens showed up to express their objections. Not one spoke in favor of the plan.

Nevertheless, the decision was taken to move ahead and bring the plan to a vote of the full commission the following night, and the plan was then unanimously adopted.

What is the commission’s motivation? Ostensibly, they want to cut \$75,000 from senior services over the next two years and, as part of that effort, integrate Senior Services and the Senior Center into the city’s recreational

system, rather than administering it through the city-at-large. At Tuesday's public hearing, commissioners responded to public objections by noting that senior citizens are simply afraid of change. Citizens raised many valid objections: Why must only senior services suddenly become pay-for when facilities and services for other residents remain free? Why not charge for access to Lithia and Garfield parks or for use of public tennis courts, baseball and soccer fields? Seniors on fixed incomes can ill-afford to pay for services that have heretofore been available to them without cost. But this cost-cutting motivation misses the larger, behind-the-scenes agenda of the Parks and Rec Commission. Director Black and his five-man commission intend to build a multi-generational recreation center at Hunter Park and will soon come to the public to ask for approval of a \$3.5 million bond issue to fund this complex. With the Daniel Meyer swimming pool as its centerpiece, the new complex is to be a state-of-the-art, multiuse facility. With the YMCA less than a mile away and the existing Senior Center nearby, one must question whether, if a properly executed needs assessment had been undertaken, it might well invalidate the need for such an expensive complex.

Before formulating Director Black's plan to revamp senior services, Parks and Rec commissioners failed to even discuss their ideas with the many seniors most affected by their decision, an unacceptable failure in their decision-making process that is clearly unaligned with the spirit of Ashland. Before the plan was formulated, no meetings or conversations were held with seniors who use the services, nor with volunteers who serve at the Center, or staff who serve both the seniors and the volunteers. In addition, none of the commissioners considered or responded to a 150-page report created by the Senior Center's Director and Senior Center Advisory Committee, a document that sets forth current and future plans for the Center. This document was simply ignored, and commissioners refused an invitation to discuss it.

Included in the commissioners' and Director Black's plan is the intention to relocate most senior services from the Senior Center near Hunter Park to The Grove, located on East Main near the police station. In public testimony on August 9th, seniors pointed out that there is no public transportation to The Grove and that it is too far for most seniors to walk. The Grove is essentially a large gymnasium, an environment that makes conversation and socializing difficult or impossible, especially for the hearing impaired. Furthermore, there are no kitchen facilities for

preparation of the noon meal, critical both for nourishment and socialization. Seniors were clear that, while change can be difficult for them, they aren't afraid of it. But for many who gather at the center, they see themselves as a family, one that is being radically disrupted by the adopted plan. As voters and taxpayers, seniors have every right to be included in forming policy that so directly affects their quality of life. Sadly, all their objections fell on deaf ears.

In the days following the decision, citizens have expressed strong feelings about the commission's decision and process, calling them out for their "arrogant, top-down management style," and their "willingness to trade off senior programs and services for a splashy, career-building trophy project." What is clear is that the quality of life of our senior citizens has been seriously diminished and discounted by the commission's decision and their abject failure to consider and represent seniors' true needs.

Democracy in Ashland is broken.

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Ashland