

The Whatcom Falls Neighborhood Association members got together on Tuesday, November 15 for their semi-monthly meeting at the Kulshan Middle School. As always, our volunteer president Rick Sawyer presided while secretary Steve Williamson took notes. About 15 neighbors attended.

Regarding attendance incentives, a neighbor has donated a \$25 gift debit card to be awarded by our neighborhood Association at the next meeting by a free drawing for all in attendance.

THE MAJOR TOPIC discussed at the meeting other than routine business was the homeless camps here in the city, especially in Whatcom Falls Park. Our neighborhood police officer, Eric Osterkamp, gave us a lot of facts that were in turn disturbing, enlightening, and challenging. Here are some of the items that were covered:

- There are about 200 camps in Bellingham some of which are abandoned, but all of which require careful cleanup by our city's staff. Cleanup includes dealing with not only litter, but also often-dangerous abandoned needles, human waste, stolen goods, and other hazards both to the environment and to passersby.
- Emphasizing the difficulties of dealing with these spaces, Officer Osterkamp reviewed a recent cleanup of a camp near Samish Way and Bill McDonald Parkway. Here, it took 16 various staff members from the police department, the parks department, and other specialties about six hours to totally restore an area that had about nine tents or makeshift shelters housing about 15 people. Our president Rick Sawyer participated, and he gave us an idea of what it was like, indicating that before actually working on the project, he had to equip himself with boots and a hazmat suit – and he was glad he did! The site was an awful, unpleasant, filthy mess...
- Of course, we were interested in the process and it actually has a number of steps. When a camp is called to the attention of the police department (see contact information below), an officer will contact the occupants and unless it is an emergency situation (with an immediate safety or health risk), everyone in it will be given five or 10 days to vacate the premises. At the same time, the Opportunity Council is notified and visits the site to offer services to the residents, trying to provide housing for those that will accept it, particularly families and/or children.
- In general, we were told, there are three kinds of people in the camps: persons who are mentally ill, are drug-addicted, or are criminals. About one third are not from Whatcom County. (Officer Osterkamp pointed out that the contingent that is mentally ill is there as a result of a lack of treatment facilities that provide care to those unable to reliably provide for themselves.)
- On the other hand, only about 13% of the homeless have no beds available to them – they just prefer to be at a camp!

Of course, the first reaction is, "why can't the city do something about it?"

- The answer is simply that there is no ordinance that can deny someone the right to sleep in a tent if

the property owner permits it. To actually arrest these people for trespassing (rather than just “moving them along”) only puts a burden on the jails and increases the amount of staff needed to supervise them as well as all the associated costs of housing and feeding.

- Although there is much stolen property at most of the camps, most of it is specifically unrecorded; for instance, most bicycle owners do not register nor keep the serial numbers of their bikes and so there is no way to prove a particular bike or other item at a homeless camp was stolen! (Of course, the thieves know this and so they just claim “I found it!”)

- One very effective way to deal with these camps is what officers call “mow down and trim up”. This program where tall grass and weeds are mowed down, and tree limbs are removed up to a height of about 6 feet exposes camp areas and the residents don’t like it! They go somewhere else. (You can check the areas on Lakeway south of Fred Meyer for an example of this – it has been very effective.) Officer Eric emphasized that residents should be very, very careful about approaching persons living in these homeless camps on their own. Instead, any indication of a homeless camp that has not already been dealt with by the police should be directed to the new litter control officer at the Bellingham Police Department, Langley West. He is now the person to whom these complaints should be directed and he can be contacted at 360 – 778 – 8623.

Eric also emphasized, “never give these folks money! I can tell you it will just go to alcohol or drugs; and I can tell you that those who claim to be ‘veterans’ seldom are! By giving them money, you are actually making their illegal (or at least publically intrusive) situation more tenable for them without remedying it.”

Here are links to a video and to another discussion of the subject. (Officer Osterkamp is expected to post yet another video, of the camp cleanup described above near Samish Way, soon.)

Video: https://whatcomfalls.nextdoor.com/news_f...

Discussion: https://whatcomfalls.nextdoor.com/news_f...

ANOTHER SUBJECT that was discussed was the upcoming improvement of the Bellingham Water Treatment Facility in Whatcom Falls Park. This will include improved filtering of the incoming water as well as a different method of creating chlorination using salt rather than liquid chlorine, reducing transport of hazardous chlorine gas through the community as well as a reduction in cost. That project gets underway this month and will continue through, at the latest, October 2018 according to city planners. [Rick Sawyer has another posting on this subject on this site dated 11/21/2016.]

BICYCLISTS LIVING IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD will be interested in the Lakeway Drive Bikeway Study. Information about it can be found at this link:

https://www.cob.org/gov/projects/Pages/P..._bikeway-study-es-529.aspx

WITH A STAGGERING \$69.49 IN THE TREASURY and in the spirit of the season, it was moved and seconded that we donate a turkey to Francis Place, a facility for the homeless. It was approved.

THE NEXT MEETING WILL BE TUESDAY, JANUARY 10, AT 7:00 P.M. Come and possibly win that \$25 debit card!

Respectfully submitted by Joe Coons.