

J-STREET NEIGHBORHOOD VOICES THOUGHTS, CONCERNS OVER HOMELESS SHELTER

Missoula Current | Published: September 7, 2023

A security officer talks with a resident during an open house at the Johnso...

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(Missoula Current) Looking to connect with area residents, the city hosted an open house at the Johnson Street shelter Wednesday evening for neighbors to ask questions and voice their concerns.

Even as the shelter is set to open from mid-September until August 2024, much remains uncertain. Solely a winter shelter in past years, the building now faces renovation needs for its year-round opening, while the surrounding area will likely require public safety services.

Past criticisms of the shelter's planning have highlighted an absence of communication between the city and its residents. The open house served as a forum for the neighborhood to contribute their voices to the shelter's future and seek solutions.

"I think it's really important that the community feels seen and heard regarding how this shelter impacts the larger body of this city," said Matthew Strohmaier, a homeless outreach worker for the Poverello Center.

Present at the open house were several city officials, in addition to Poverello Center employees and security staff. A welcome booth offered water bottles and snacks, as well as info sheets answering further questions. A few mattresses lay out across the spacious building's 165-bed capacity.

Locals who joined the open house expressed concerns over how the people in need of the shelter's services may affect the neighborhood. Around the city, a combination of trash, drug abuse and mental illness associated with the homeless has frustrated many residents.

Amy Doty, the owner of a custom frame shop across the street shared that while she was in support of the shelter, she worried for her business. In previous years, shelter residents have crossed the street and used drugs in front of her shop, discarding needles.

"How do we try to have a retail space in our warehouse, have customers come, and not have an area that has needles?" she asked.

Still, she came to the open house with a collaborative mindset.

"I want to find a way as a business owner and someone right in the neighborhood that we can work with this shelter," said Doty. "We're all in the same neighborhood. We all have the same right to live here."

Many residents were concerned for their safety. Missoula Police Chief Michael Colyer heard attendees share incidents of when they felt threatened by people experiencing homelessness. Other residents asked him when they should call 911, or resort to self-protection with firearms and pepper spray.

"We're just trying to be part of the solution in a pretty tough circumstance. I think the more information we can give, they're happy to hear something," said Colyer.

While some attendees searched for ways to adapt to life with a year-round shelter in their neighborhood, others saw flaws and hoped for alternatives.

John Wolverton, a near 20-year resident of the area and neighborhood organizer voiced multiple frustrations with the open forum. As he saw it, there was an imbalance of attendees.

"There are relatively few neighbors drifting through compared to the amount of public officials," Wolverton said.

Wolverton additionally criticized the placement of the Johnson Street shelter, describing it as an issue of inequity for the city.

"What we've been doing pretty much between this winter shelter area and the Poverello is pushing the lower income citizens of our community into the already lower income neighborhoods," he said.

Instead, he advocated for several smaller designated encampments around the city. "This would allow us to spread the burdens out."



Johnson Street shelter.

In response to the many criticisms aimed at the shelter, some saw the open house as a space to promote more compassion.

"Maybe if people spent one night here with them, that might change a lot of minds," said Dan Ballas, a longtime donor to the Poverello Center. "They're just ordinary people walking in and getting tired of sleeping in a car that's cold. How many of us could have something that made us homeless?"

Among the attendants of the open house was a fear around finding long term solutions to Missoula's active homelessness.

"The unhoused population needs self-discipline that they do not practice," said Alan Craig Ross, a man living on the streets who checked in on the gathering. "They want to practice it but they don't. It's like raising a spoiled child and taking away the silver spoon."

Following the meeting, Ross went outside to find somewhere to camp in the rain.

Ginny Merriam, the Communications Director for the Office of the Mayor highlighted the complexities of how residents feel.

"Some people say I don't want this in my neighborhood, while at the same time they think the Johnson Street shelter is a good thing," Merriam said. "A lot of people have mixed feelings. People in Missoula are generally big-hearted. City council hears that and acts in a way that reflects these values."