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Advocate says Willis Park ideal for Roseburg homeless camp



The 139-year-old Willis House and the park beside it, seen in a recent file photo, will be the subject of an upcoming Roseburg City Council meeting in which homeless advocates will lobby to set up a camp for the homeless in Willis park.



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An advocate for the homeless wants to set up a camp at Willis Park in Roseburg, an idea yet to be presented to the city but already panned by the mayor and at least two council members.

“To me, it would destroy the downtown,” Mayor Larry Rich said.

Oakland resident Jeri Benedetto of Occupy Roseburg said a camp in the 700 block of Southeast Rose Street would keep the park in public hands and be a good location for the homeless to stay.

“We need for the campground to be accessible for folks who are on foot and who have disabilities, so that they can access services that they need, and most of those are downtown,” Benedetto said.

After much consideration, the City Council more than a year ago put the 139-year-old Willis House, the former City Hall, up for sale. Last month, councilors voted to sell the adjacent park and gazebo with the house. Prospective buyers have indicated an interest in turning the house into a bed and breakfast.

A majority of the council decided the house would be better off in private ownership, while adding to the tax rolls.

Meanwhile, homeless advocates have been scouting for a place to establish a camp. Benedetto said Willis Park would be ideal for tents and huts, while the house could be used for services such as distributing clothes and food.

She said the group would be willing to lease the property for a nominal fee, like \$1 a year, and take over the upkeep of the property. Homeless advocates plan to attend the Aug. 26 City Council meeting and pitch the idea.

Benedetto said she hopes the council is as “forward thinking” as other cities, such as Eugene.

“We are going to say, ‘We really need you guys to help us here. We are not asking for money. We are just asking for your input and your assistance in making a winter camp available for the homeless community,’” Benedetto said.

Councilman Marty Katz said the city should not get involved in providing shelter for the homeless.

“I am not sure that falls within our responsibility,” he said.

Katz, whose business The Record Store is a handful of blocks from the Willis House, said a homeless camp could cause safety and sanitation problems downtown.

“I just think it’s going to be a can of worms,” Katz said. “It’s going to be an eyesore and real health hazard.”

Councilman Bob Cotterell said he would be concerned about the safety of residents who enjoy Willis Park.

“I will not be supportive of a transient homeless camp anywhere in the city,” Cotterell said. “It doesn’t matter where you put it, it’s going to generate problems.”

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