

Protesters air Senior Center grievances on the Plaza

First meeting of Ashland Senior Program Advisory Committee set for Tuesday

By Julie Akins
For the Tidings

"It's a bit depressing," says 89-year-old Dorothy Parsons who worked for 17 years at the Ashland Senior Center at 1699 Homes Ave. before it was recently reorganized. She left her job after center Director Chris Dodson was let go on Aug. 28. "I had a regular schedule and people I saw. I'm not going down there much anymore."

Parsons and a dozen others protested on Thursday afternoon on the Ashland Plaza concerned that the Senior Center is being "guttled" by the Parks and Recreation department in favor of a more recreational agenda and a decentralization of services.

It's a concern that Parks and Recreation Director Michael Black strenuously counters. "We will not be moving any of the core services we provide at the Senior Center," he said. "Seniors are comfortable with that location and that is staying. That is the home of the senior program."

He says instead services could be expanded to reach more people. "It's not cutting, but expanding to make sure our most vulnerable populations are reached." Black says a review of services instigated two years ago showed holes in service. "It became clear there is room to improve and reach more of the constituents who need this type of service."

Black has created an ad hoc committee, he says, to examine the concerns of the protesters and others to seek out middle ground and find programs that



Sharon Laws, foreground, and others protesting changes at the Ashland Senior Center hold up signs by the Plaza on Thursday. (PHOTO BY JULIE AKINS)

reach the most people.

Yet protesters like former Senior Program Manager Sharon Laws says she's concerned about the outreach services that the center provided. "By processing utility assistance in the Senior Center," she said, "staff would do home visits." Laws says she's concerned the new vision for senior services will not include that. "It takes the holistic, integrated approach out."

"You cut the baby in half as

the solution. They'll kill the baby if they split services up," says Sue Wilson, who does not support the new approach. Wilson says offering the referral services currently available through the center including utility assistance is crucial.

Meantime, Black maintains that the intention is to leave current programs intact, add to the programs currently at the center and additionally create occasional outreach clinics and services in other buildings around town.

"As a community we're made up of a bunch of neighborhoods," he said. "There are people who find it convenient to go to the current Senior Center. There's got to be people who don't find it convenient. For those people we would duplicate it in other parts of the city. I'm not saying move, but duplicate where we already have facilities for those who don't have the mobility or ability to get there."

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Protester Susanne Severeid acknowledged the existence of the new Ad Hoc Committee to look at concerns raised, but said she wishes input from citizens, employees and others would have been heard and she didn't feel they were before Dodson was released and changes announced. "It wasn't broken. It didn't need a big fix. They were not accepting input," Severeid said.

Severeid worked part time at the center, but left when she learned Dodson was being let go. "The new people are nice," Severeid said, "but they aren't trained."

Dodson attended the protest, but said she could not speak about the situation right now. Black acknowledged her work. "The manager did a good job at what she did," he said. "It will be hard to replace her in the compassion that she showed.

But there are people out there that are just as caring and able to move in the direction we want to go. That's the reason why. I don't feel comfortable that the former management had the ability to move it in a new direction."

That new direction, says Black, is adding to the current services while keeping what they have. As to budgeting it, he says the Parks and Recreation Commission suggested he first create the programs they see as serving the most people, especially those most vulnerable, then look at the budgeting. "We aren't cutting senior services. I think we'll have the money to pay for the expansion. I don't see that as a problem."

The new ad hoc committee, The Ashland Senior Program Advisory Committee, will make recommendations to the Parks and Recreation Committee and is having its first meeting from 3:15 to 5:15 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 10, at The Grove, 1195 East Main St.

The committee is comprised of program participants, related field experts from Ashland at Home and Rogue Valley Council of Governments. It will organize two public meetings to gather input while also meeting regularly over the next three to five months, according to Black.

But Laws remains skeptical about how to best move forward. "When trust is broken, it's hard to get it back," she said. She is rooting for all services that treat the people she saw the most often, those who worked hard through their lives but had few resources to live on. "Is it all for the wealthy and well? That's not the kind of community where I want to live."

Black assures them, "We will not cut senior services."

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