

CHRIS RICKERT



Hard-case homeless might test the faithful

Most of us admit to some sympathy for the homeless.

What we don't often admit is that some homeless are more responsible for their condition than others.

On Monday, the Madison Plan Commission is scheduled to take up a proposal that could test just how much sympathy we can muster for them.

Under an ordinance sponsored by Ald. Marsha Rummel, certain churches would be able to let homeless people camp in tents on their lawns or park their cars or so-called "little houses" — basically rooms on wheels that can be towed from one place to another — in their lots.

Rummel said the ordinance is not aimed at any specific homeless population. But zoning administrator Matt Tucker said it seems less tailored to families, who qualify for other options, than to couples or single men and women.

To the extent that the homeless cause problems for police and policymakers, the ones that do tend to be single men. These are the people panhandling on State Street, drinking at the Brittingham Park shelter or threatening public safety at the public space near the Capitol known as Philosopher's Grove.

Many of them are mentally ill or have substance abuse problems. Often they have criminal histories.

They might not, in other words, be able to meet the standards required of homeless families living inside 14 Madison-area churches in a temporary shelter program run by The Road Home. Among other things, they can't have recent criminal or substance abuse problems, executive director Kristin Rucinski said.

The proposed ordinance is "just zoning stuff," explained co-sponsor Ald. Larry Palm, and "any congregation that is going to want to implement this is going to want to establish some rules of the road."

And who knows how many homeless might be capable or willing to abide by those rules?

So far, the city hasn't identified any organizations that might participate in the program but it has looked at about 10 examples of properties that would qualify.

All are in the central or near-central city, close to social services and transportation, Tucker said.

Participation in the program would require Plan Commission approval, and people living in the neighborhood would be notified of the effort and have a chance to comment on it, he said.

Rummel said the single homeless can be "a challenging population" but that there could be a natural motivation to limit their numbers in any one spot because state camping laws kick in when there are more than three people at a campsite.

"It's not like there's going to be an encampment," she said.

Maybe a congregation could agree to accept three homeless people on its property, she said, and essentially embrace them as part of the church.

That would be a test of faith all right if the homeless are alcoholics or mentally ill or convicted felons or flailing through life in some other self-destructive way.

But no one deserves to live on the streets, and it could be a test worth passing — as much as for the faithful as for the flailing.

Contact Chris Rickert at 608-252-6198 or crickert@madison.com, as well as on Facebook and Twitter (@ChrisRickertWSJ). His column appears Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

Literacy fund collecting dust

An audit found that Walker's Read to Lead program spent \$0 so far.

DEE J. HALL
dhall@madison.com, 608-252-6132

The state has spent none of the \$400,000 set aside as part of Gov. Scott Walker's Read to Lead Development Fund aimed at boosting literacy and early childhood education, according to an audit released Friday.

The Legislative Audit Bureau reported that "no expenditures have been incurred nor any commitments made since the establishment of the fund." The program was approved by the Legislature in 2011 and the fund

established in April 2012, according to the audit.

The development fund is intended to provide grants to school boards and others to support programs that help boost reading.

But the audit said that the Read to Lead Development Council that is supposed to recommend how the grant money should be used has not yet been appointed by Walker.

"As of Aug. 31, 2013, no appointments were made to the Council," the audit found. "However, staff in the Office of the Governor anticipate membership of the Council will be finalized in fall 2013."

In a statement, Walker spokeswoman Julie Lund said the Read to

Lead project is an "ongoing initiative" and "there was no deadline set in the bill to have the Council up and running."

She added that many other pieces of Read to Lead are already underway, including new reading assessments, educator evaluations, a program connecting male inmates with their children through reading and a program to encourage day-care providers to boost the literacy of children in their care.

As for the Read to Lead Development Fund Council, Lund said, "it is in the process of being formed, and many of the members have accepted positions. The board is expected to begin meeting and making recommendations for dispersing funds this fall."

The Read to Lead Development Council is intended as a public-private partnership tasked with "raising funds to support worthy reading initiatives across the state."

The council, once formed, will include Walker or a designee as chairman; state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers or a designee as vice chairman; leading members of the Senate and Assembly education committees or their designees; three practicing educators and 13 members of the philanthropic, business or literacy communities.

"Our goal continues to be for the Council to be in place and to begin issuing awards for the grant money in this academic year," Lund said.

SCIENCE FESTIVAL MIXES LEARNING, FUN



Photos by AMBER ARNOLD — State Journal



Amy Noelke, of Madison, and daughter Emma, 4, attempt to dodge trees as they go "skiing" Friday in the Cave Automatic Virtual Environment (CAVE) during the Wisconsin Science Festival at the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery. The Wisconsin Science Festival continues through the weekend at sites around the state. At left, 11-year-olds Hannah Miller, left, and Jyllian Gravitt — dressed as twins for Twin Day at Beloit's Aldrich Middle School — learn how to culture stem cells while on a field trip to the science festival at the Wisconsin Institutes for Discovery.

Council to challenge Soglin's veto of Longfellow School plan

The mayor says the proposal violates "some very basic" zoning rules.

DENNIS PUNZEL
dpunzel@madison.com, 608-252-6179

The future of historic Longfellow School will come down to a matter of parking.

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin took an unusual step earlier this week when he vetoed a plan to convert the former school building into an apartment complex, a plan that had gained unanimous approval of the City Council last week.

That veto, however, is not the final word on the matter, as the council will vote Tuesday to override the veto, needing 14 votes from the 20 members.

The Alexander Co. proposed to buy the former school, 210 S. Brooks St., which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, from Meriter Hospital and convert it into 40 apartments. There also would be an adjacent four-story new building with 64 more apartments.

The Greenbush Neighborhood Association opposed that plan, even after it was scaled down from the original proposal.

But Soglin's objection is not to the building, but rather, to a provision that would allow Meriter to use 38 parking spaces for valet parking during the day. Those spots would be used for tenant parking at night.

Such an arrangement would be unprecedented in the city, Soglin said.

"A veto is never easy," Soglin said on Friday. "On the other hand, making the decision was easy because this violation of some very basic, standard neighborhood development and zoning issues was so clear cut. We simply do not put commercial parking in a residential development."

In his veto message, Soglin said the plan would be counter to the city's goal of de-emphasizing automobile transportation.

"We talk a good deal about placemaking, freeing ourselves from the automobile, and new urbanism," he said in making the veto. "We should not mock the people of Madison who are committed to balanced transportation. ... Perhaps the city of Madison would have approved this type of land use in the 1950s or 1960s but after all we have been through it is difficult to believe that a progressive city would approve such an incursion in the 21st century."

Ald. Sue Ellingson, 13th District, who represents the area, doesn't follow Soglin's line of thinking.

"I don't understand the mayor's logic on this one," Ellingson said. "His argument is that there should not be any commercial parking spaces in a residential building. He says that encourages cars."

"Frankly, what we have there

now is a surface parking lot for 71 cars that Meriter uses for valet parking and an almost-empty school building. What we would replace it with is \$10 million worth of investments, renovating the school and 38 shared parking spaces that Meriter would use during the day and that tenants would use at night.

"I am just baffled by how the mayor thinks this encourages cars. It doesn't make any sense to me."

Ellingson said she hasn't polled her fellow council members but figures if support for the plan was unanimous a week ago, there likely would be 14 votes for overriding the veto next week.

"I would be really surprised if this veto is not overridden," she said. "But I've been surprised before."

Randall Alexander, Alexander Co. CEO, told the council last week that the plan would fall through without the parking deal with Meriter.

Soglin took issue with that assertion.

"If the economics of Madison downtown development have changed so drastically in the past three months that this project only works with this parking arrangement, I suggest there is something wrong with the development, not this veto," he said in his veto statement. "The valet vehicles can be parked in the Meriter ramp. If there are insufficient spaces for them, then Meriter needs a new transportation plan."

Officials: Ready as ever for health law

Sign-up starts Tuesday for the new federal insurance exchanges.

SCOTT BAUER
Associated Press

Wisconsin health and insurance officials said Friday that the state is as prepared as it can be for next week's launch of open enrollment under the new federal health law.

But no one is quite sure what to expect.

"I'll tell you Wednesday," joked Kevin Moore, Wisconsin's deputy secretary of health services when asked Friday whether there would be a stampede or trickle of people trying to sign up for insurance Tuesday when enrollment begins.

The online exchange, or marketplace, is supposed to offer a consumer-friendly way to buy health insurance while forcing insurers to compete for business. Consumers can apply online at healthcare.gov, through a call center, in person, or through the mail.

Gov. Scott Walker opposes the Affordable Care Act, and he declined to have the state set up the exchange, deferring instead to the federal government.

Walker also turned down federal money to pay for keeping people on Medicaid who earn up to 138 percent of the poverty line. Instead, Walker lowered Medicaid eligibility from those who earn 200 percent of the poverty line to those who earn 100 percent of it or less. That will force about 92,000 adults off of the BadgerCare program and into the exchange.

The new income eligibility limit for Medicaid starting in January will be \$11,500 for an individual or \$23,550 for a family of four.

There could be people who lose employer coverage and will be added to those shopping under the exchange, but it's impossible to predict how many that may be, said deputy insurance commissioner Dan Schwartz.

Thirteen of the 25 private insurance companies that offer policies to individuals will be selling plans on the exchange.

The federal health care law requires individuals to have health insurance starting in January or face a penalty. The enrollment period that begins Tuesday runs through March 31, although Dec. 15 is the cut-off date to sign up for policies that begin in January.

Despite Walker's opposition to the law, his administration has been working closely with health insurance providers, insurance agencies, advocacy groups, community organizations and others to establish ways to help those who will be using the exchange, Schwartz and Moore said.

Both Schwartz and Moore said they encouraged everyone using the exchange to shop around, both for plans sold there that are eligible for federal subsidies and those outside the exchange in the private market.

Low income people, including those being kicked off Medicaid, will be eligible for federal subsidies. But those earning more may not be, so they may find better deals outside the exchange.

Still, given the complexity of eligibility criteria, the plans available and subsidies, Schwartz recommended that shoppers find someone trained to navigate the system. "This is confusing," he said.