

Senior center decision shameful

By Heidi Gottlieb

A shameful decision has been made by the Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission to move functions of the senior center to the Grove and lay off the 1.7 full-time equivalent staff for the transition. The plan shows no regard for the citizens who depend upon a dedicated location for services.

If the primary goal of Parks and Recreation is to build and maintain parks, the actions of the elected park commissioners should move the city of Ashland toward greater enrichment of the community and provide for all citizens in an equitable manner. Instead, a blind eye is shown to the physical, psychosocial and safety needs of a significant portion of the aging population.

The elected commission is out of touch with the social service aspect that is the underlying purpose of city parks and recreation. If "cost recovery" is the genuine concern, how does the Parks and Recreation Department justify spending \$230,000 for an outside study to determine what is needed to update Lithia Park? The department has 44 FTE staff, which is seven more than the Police Department and nine more than the Fire Department. Surely among the staff there are individuals who can determine what Lithia

Park needs and proceed without a "park study." Where are the real priorities?

I've watched seniors navigate with canes and walkers, feed lunch to their totally dependent spouse, guide their 100-year-old parent to foot-care sessions, and enjoy conversation and laughter in a safe and secure place where staff is versed in their specific needs. It is disrespectful and unkind to place them in fear, competing with the general population for space at The Grove. They need a dedicated location where the pace is slower, acoustics support conversation, activities are close together and there is easy access to dedicated staff, volunteers and all that supports and promotes their safety and independence.

They have this at the Ashland Senior Center at Hunter Park. The able-bodied and able-financed over-55 population, who have easy access and ability to assimilate the multiple sensory experiences a visit to The Grove entails, may not be negatively impacted by this change. The decision to implement changes without honoring input from the citizens who will be directly affected is despicable and should be of great concern to all.

The community has and can continue to come together to take care of its seniors in ways that benefit everyone involved. Parks and Recreation provides

the senior center location for foot and nail care for seniors; senior center staff coordinate the schedule. Soroptimist International of Ashland covers a portion of the cost. Foot care nurses donate a portion of their time. Seniors pay a low cost for the service. This is an example where community collaboration meets a particular need.

Unfortunately, the tack presented by Parks and Recreation makes invisible those seniors who have challenges by making it far more difficult for them to access services. Instead of meeting the needs of the senior population, the plan caters to those who are physically and financially better able to take advantage of The Grove under the guise of being "multigenerational." This reeks of class inequity.

Parks and Recreation states that increasing revenues is secondary to ensuring services, but the APRC's unanimous vote shows lack of knowledge, concern or understanding of the social consequences of the change of venue and abrupt removal of knowledgeable and extremely supportive staff. There is no reason, in a community as affluent as Ashland, that seniors with challenges should become lost in the shuffle. They deserve much more.

— Heidi Gottlieb, RN, lives in Ashland.