

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Homelessness touches the North End

Homelessness was the major topic at last week's meeting of Pottstown Borough Council.

Specifically, concerns were expressed about an initiative by a local non-profit, Beacon of Hope, to use the basement of St. Paul's United Church of Christ, Franklin and Grace streets, to house 35 homeless people overnight during the winter months.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Beacon of Hope has the funding and zoning approval to build a 45-bed shelter at High and Glasgow streets. But construction will not be completed until the summer of 2024.

After being cited last November for illegally operating the St. Paul's shelter, Beacon of Hope belatedly filed a variance request with the Pottstown Zoning Hearing Board to continue using the church basement temporarily.

The Zoning Hearing Board will meet March 29 to consider the request. After many citizen comments, and discussion among its members, Council decided not to take a position for or against the shelter.

For years, Pottstown has been a magnet for the poor because of its older, higher density housing, low-cost rentals, ubiquitous sidewalks, public transportation system, and abundance of social service agencies.

The low density suburbs, which are designed exclusively for the car, don't have a homeless problem because the homeless can't get there and wouldn't receive any help if they did.

HOMELESS MAN'S CAR is parked in the lot of Zion's UCC Church on Chestnut Street on a January day in 2015. Homeless people have squatted in Pottstown for years. Regarding the car at right, the homeless person living in it was persuaded after some days to move out of his car and into a shelter.



Meanwhile, Pottstown has numerous churches with excess capacity because their congregations have dwindled as parishioners of means moved to the suburbs in recent decades.

Many of these churches have become havens for the poor to receive food, clothing, and other necessities.

For example, the former First Methodist Church on the 400 block of High Street became Mission First in 2020, when its congregation merged with Cedarville United Methodist Church in North Coventry. The Cedarville church is now used for worship services and congregational life, while the Pottstown building is used to provide food, clothing, and social services to the needy.

In my downtown neighborhood, Trinity United Church of Christ and Emmanuel Lutheran Church, both facing Hanover Street, have been offering free meals to the poor for years.

Across the street from my Chestnut Street house, Zion's United Church of Christ has been one of several churches that took turns sheltering the homeless on winter nights until the pandemic shut down their operations.

Downtown residents routinely live with trash, abandoned shopping carts, and occasional noisy altercations among passersby. We don't like it, but borough government seems unable to do anything about it.

The character of the North End, on the other hand, is closer to the suburbs. Residents are more familiar with seeing neighbors, not strangers, ambling along their streets. They want the homeless to go somewhere else.

Beacon of Hope is likely to get its variance, however, and the North End will have to live with the situation another year or two.