

Letter: Council vs. Mission: Cooperation is a two-way street

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To the editor:

The Oct. 15 Salem News editorial headlined "Council should work with — not against — Salem Mission," suggested that the Salem City Council's exploration of the national Ten Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness had a hidden agenda.

As a neighbor of the Mission, and one of the leaders of the effort to save St. Mary's for community use, I attended the meeting where this plan was proposed. The only agenda I heard was one that involved helping more of Salem's homeless.

The 10-year plan would actually help the Salem Mission raise more funds and serve more efficiently by addressing the complete spectrum of Salem's homeless community — including children and families, a population the Mission does not house. By the City Council taking the lead on this, rather than an agency whose leaders do not live in Salem, our resources can be more responsibly spent, and our city's interests better protected.

As far as cooperation goes, the Salem Mission is the one that needs to learn the meaning of this concept. The Mission's lawyer instructed board members not to attend this public meeting because he felt this session was meant to embarrass the Mission.

The Mission's lack of attendance was the embarrassment. You can't fault our city councilors if the group you want them to work with does not even show up to be part of a dialogue.

How about the concept of the Salem Mission working with — not against — the community? The Mission's plans to turn St. Mary's Italian Church into housing were veiled in secrecy for a year before they were revealed to the public. By that point the Mission had already applied for their first round of funding and the neighborhood was told it was too late for these plans to be scuttled.

Had the Mission involved the neighborhood from the outset, we could have worked together from the start to find a more agreeable location for its new housing.

As important as it is to find housing for those who lack it, this housing can be found without sacrificing community spaces with all their inherent inclusiveness. Giving, sharing, enriching the whole is what we do when we walk out our doors and enter the community of others. We want to give the Mission's residents an opportunity to be part of this community, not lock them behind doors of resentment.

As much good as the Mission has done, their conversion of St. Mary's would forever stain their reputation. St. Mary's is the cultural thumbprint left by the Italian-American community as a gift to Salem. Losing St. Mary's to housing would be as ridiculous as losing Hamilton Hall, Old Town Hall or Abbot Hall for the same purpose. If the Mission added housing while subtracting pieces of Salem's history, nothing would be gained in the equation but resentment.

The Salem Mission does not hold the copyright on compassion and caring. The City Council proposes helping all of Salem's homeless, and doing so in a way that is not disruptive to community, history, art and culture.

The fact they would do this on their own turf lifts the nobility of this idea beyond the current Margin Street model. Rare is the missionary who builds their mission in their own backyard — a compassionate life is all the tidier when you can outsource your benevolence.

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Salem

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