

SAFE CAMP UPDATE | March 2020

We want to keep our neighbors around the Safe Camp at First Congregational Church informed. Here's an update:

The church has applied to Benton County for a conditional use permit for Safe Camp. The county Planning Commission will take up the application at a hearing scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 17 at the county's Sunset Building, 4077 SW Research Way. The commission is accepting public comment about the application and will be hearing oral testimony at the meeting. Here are some questions and answers about the church's application.

Q: What exactly is the church asking for?

A: The church proposes to use the 1.35 acres of its property that is in the county as part of our Safe Camp ministry – our work to provide temporary, transitional shelter to people in our community who lack shelter.

Q: Didn't the county already approve Safe Camp?

A: Yes, temporarily. But county officials also asked the church to apply for the conditional use permit, and the church has done so.

Q: What will the Planning Commission be focused on during the hearing?

A: By law, members of the commission can consider only three criteria as they consider the application: First, does the proposed use of the land seriously interfere with uses on adjacent property, with the character of the area or the purpose of the planning zone? (The land in question here is zoned Urban Residential.) Second, does the proposed use impose an undue burden on public improvements, facilities, utilities or services available to the area? Third, does the proposed use comply with any additional criteria which may be required by code regulations? (This third criterion does not apply in this case, since the code itself does not include any additional criteria.)

Q: Could the commission ask for conditions as part of issuing a permit?

A: Yes – and the church already has proposed a variety of conditions that it believes will improve the safety and comfort of Safe Camp guests and our neighbors. For example, the church will cap the maximum number of guests at Safe Camp at 21, divided between tents and microshelters. (At this writing, Safe Camp has seven guests; by contrast, when Safe Camp began in July after the illegal camp site adjacent to the church property was cleared by law enforcement officials, the camp had 23 guests.) As for the microshelters, we believe they offer significant safety advantages over tents, but we still have not received regulatory approval for their occupancy. The conditions proposed by the church also call for guests to sign a code of conduct; failure to adhere to the code of conduct can lead to a guest's eviction from Safe Camp. (Guests now must sign a code of conduct, which has been substantially revised since July, and guests have been evicted for code violations.)

Other conditions are designed to address fire safety concerns – for example, each camping site and microshelter will be equipped with a fire extinguisher. (For more on the conditions to which the church has agreed, you can read our supplemental materials to the conditional use application, on the county’s website at <http://bit.ly/2xeWYSW>)

Q. What about law enforcement concerns regarding Safe Camp?

A. We believe many of these concerns reflect the law enforcement experience in dealing with illegal camping in locations such as the tree farm property adjacent to Safe Camp. Law enforcement in the county has much less experience working with a managed camp situation such as Safe Camp. Our position is that having a managed camp in which guests must adhere to a code of conduct, and where they can get access to necessary services, is safer (and easier for officers to deal with) than what has been the county’s status quo: A series of illegal camps that spring up throughout the city and county with a constantly shifting population.

Again, we’re under no illusions that Safe Camp by itself will end these illegal camps throughout the city and county; after all, the illegal camp in the forested property adjacent to the church property has been active, on and off, for 20 years. But we believe Safe Camp provides a better, safer option to these illegal camps – both for campers and our neighbors.

Q. How does Safe Camp tie into SafePlace?

A. Safe Camp is part of a larger effort, SafePlace, which aims to place microshelters with churches around the Corvallis area. Two churches already have agreed to place the microshelters on their properties, after city officials clear the regulatory way for their use. Other congregations have expressed interest in doing the same. In turn, SafePlace will be part of a larger umbrella organization working on the continuum of housing issues in the Corvallis area.

Q. How can I learn more?

A: Information about the hearing (and links to documents that have been filed with the Benton County Planning Department by the church and others) can be accessed at this website: <http://bit.ly/2xeWYSW>

Q: Can I offer testimony for the Planning Commission?

A: Yes. Members of the public can testify both at the March 17 meeting and can also submit written testimony. By the time you receive this, the deadline will have passed for written submissions to be included in the report on the application being prepared by the planning staff. But written testimony received before the Planning Commission meeting will be shared with commission members. Only comments addressing the three applicable code criteria (as listed on the reverse page) can be considered by the commission.

As always, we welcome questions and comments about Safe Camp.

Send us an email at safecamp@corvallisucc.org. We’ll respond to civil emails as soon as possible.