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**Section:** Local

### Main Street's social service dilemma

*Marisa Donelan*

Fitchburg business owner Clark Straight said private investment plans in the city's downtown show promise for Main Street. But a large number of social-service programs, including revived plans for a "feeding ministry" in a Main Street church, could have a negative impact on the city, Straight, who owns the Johnsonia Condominiums, said Thursday.

"Fitchburg's Main Street is changing drastically," he said during an interview in his Main Street office. "And the most detrimental force that is hindering future development is the perception that Fitchburg's downtown is not a desirable place to live, work or shop."

Fitchburg officials last week showed mixed feelings about Our Father's Table -- a feeding ministry -- potentially returning to Main Street in the Faith United Parish church after leaving the Christ Church two months ago.

Some acknowledged the feeding ministry sometimes attracted people who loitered nearby the Christ Church, while saying the group's mission -- feeding hungry people -- is necessary.

The city's main drag houses a number of businesses and groups dedicated to helping homeless people and those with drug addictions, as well as some job placement agencies.

Leominster's Main Street is also home to some social service programs, and there are rooming houses and supervised transitional homes close to downtown.

A magnet

Straight said Fitchburg has been somewhat of a regional magnet for social-service programs, and he thinks other cities and towns should support their own programs.

"Fitchburg for many, many years has done way beyond its fair share of taking care of the needy," he said. "We have housed, fed, clothed, taken care of, counseled the whole region's indigent people and people with various needs. It's time for other communities to step up to the plate and help the truly needy."

Fitchburg Mayor Dan H. Mylott said Thursday he supports Our Father's Table returning to Main Street because the group needs a central location to be able to reach the people who need its services.

Many of the people the group serves are elderly or homeless and don't have the access to transportation that could take them out of the downtown area, Mylott said.

"Where else is it going to be besides the inner-city area?" he said. "Although it may not be the best use of a building in the downtown area, it's a necessary function of taking care of needy people."

Mylott also said some of the towns surrounding the Twin Cities area do not have the resources to help homeless people, so some people come to Fitchburg.

And he said the concentration of downtown social services agencies may be "detrimental," but noted the number of groups has decreased by about half within the last seven or eight years.

Scaring people away

Leominster Mayor Dean J. Mazzarella said a group of homeless men used to loiter in Monument Square, and said their presence scared away other people who wanted to use the park.

"I went over and said, 'Listen, if you guys need help, we'll get you the help,'" he said Wednesday.

Local non-profit groups and churches have feeding and shelter services that take referrals from police or the mayor's office when they have space available, Mazzarella said.

People who have drug addictions or problems with alcoholism need a place where they can sober up if they're going to improve their lives, Mazzarella said.

"You can't just give someone a room somewhere without any kind of support," he said. "The key is getting them to (sobriety counseling) meetings, getting them to counseling, all with good management and supervision."



Mazzarella said Ginny White, who owns and runs Ginny's Thrift Store and Food Pantry, has played a big part in helping out the city's homeless population.

"She holds them accountable," he said. "If you just provide people with housing it doesn't do anything ... I never give up hope because I've seen people who were literally living on the streets who've turned their lives around."

White said Thursday she helps 17 homeless people who come into her food pantry or use her Mechanic Street store to take a shower.

White said she has also given bus tickets to homeless people not from this area so they can return home, where they are more familiar with the setting and can find shelter and support elsewhere. "If you're not from Leominster or Fitchburg, don't hang out here, let me give you a bus ticket home, where you can feel safer, you can get to know that territory again," she said.

White said her goal is to find a local home for a small shelter where she'll be able to help people get back on their feet, and she said she has a hard line - no alcohol or drugs.

"If they drink, they can't be around me," she said.

"(The shelter will be a place) where you get up, shower and get working. You can't just hang out and walk the streets all day, you need to go out and find a place to work."

White said she knows it will be challenging to establish a shelter because residents don't want homeless services in their neighborhoods.

But she hopes her reputation, and the lack of police involvement with her current establishment, will help people see the benefit of giving homeless people support and psychological help.

"I respect our community and the community

respects me," she said. "I can be tough, but I do it to the best of my ability. These are human beings, and they have the right to respect and a roof over their head."

White said she'd like to see an increase in soup kitchens, where homeless people can visit to get a hot meal, instead of food pantries, where people come to receive bags of food.

"It's a sad situation, we need a soup kitchen," she said. "There are people who say, 'Not my community,' but we need to help."

**Our Father's House Inc.**, a network of homeless shelters and transitional houses for men and women -- are not affiliated with Our Father's Table -- is able to help men and women with sobriety programs, housing and job counseling, Mylott said.

"**Our Father's House** is really the only major shelter in the area, and there really is a need to have another one, probably in the vicinity of Leominster," he said of the shelters, based in Fitchburg. "It is a great source of relief for people who are in desperate trouble."

Barbara R. Garneau, the executive director of **Our Father's House**, said Tuesday her organization provides drug- and alcohol-free housing for people who are ready to commit to improving their lives. Garneau said although she thinks the region has a small population of people living on the streets.

High housing costs and a lack of full-time jobs with employment benefits contribute to sporadic periods of homelessness for individual people as well as families.

"There are no more sober rooming houses anymore because cities and towns don't want to issue the permits," she said during an interview in the group's Leighton Street shelter. "There has been a decline in quality, safe, affordable housing for people who are making the minimum wage." Garneau said there is a "myth" that other communities send their homeless people to Fitchburg to receive services.

Housing prices closer to Boston have made it increasingly difficult for low- to middle-income people to find homes or apartments, so they have moved west, she said.

"I don't see what's wrong with that," she said. "I've been doing this for 20 years ... I have seen and heard everything. People like that are always going to think those things."

Not on Main Street

Fitchburg Ward 4 City Councilor Ted DeSalvatore, who said last week he did not support Our Father's Table's return to Main Street, said Thursday he thinks the presence of homeless people on Main Street could deter both potential businesses and customers.

"Very few people feel comfortable coming downtown when there's a lot of people just hanging around," he said. "In most cities, especially bigger cities, any one street can have a mixed-use environment where homeless people gather. But we've only got one main street. We don't have a lot of places of commerce where people can set up shop."

DeSalvatore, a mayoral candidate, said he would rather see a community-needs center set up away from downtown that can be a destination on the bus line.

He said he envisions a place where people can get a meal, job counseling and training, emergency shelter and other social services that would be run by several regional service groups.

But DeSalvatore said he's heard complaints from downtown businesses about homelessness, and said he sees serious problems from people who aren't using shelters and aid programs.

"We have to be practical," he said. "You can't destroy businesses downtown for the benefit of the needy and make people more needy. Yes, I have passion in my heart for those that are in need, but I also have a responsibility to help those who are trying to start businesses here."

Leominster City Council President Richard Marchand said homelessness is a complex national problem, and said communities have a responsibility to help the needy.

"It's a moral obligation we have," he said. "We can't be afraid of people who are homeless. We have to reach out and help them."

Marchand said the men who hung around in Monument Square did cause problems for local businesses, but said the city's police force is capable of referring people to services.

"In that situation that took place about three summers ago, you'd see a bus come every day and drop off about eight to 12 men in the park ... they were not from here, but they knew they could hang around here and not be told to move on," he said. "Sometimes when there are issues of addiction or mental illness, people become uncomfortable walking by someone who may be suffering from other issues that they're dealing with other than being homeless."

Straight said he is confident the city's downtown will eventually become a vibrant place, citing millions of dollars investors are planning to invest in housing developments and commercial space.

But he said the problem of people loitering downtown could still turn away investors.

"The future of Fitchburg will be hindered by the continued presence of non-working, non-productive individuals," Straight said.