

St. Francis Parish Council Minutes
Special Meeting; by Zoom streaming service
Saturday, April 18, 2020

Fred Bermudez, absent	Patrick Mahan, present
Ed Condon, present	Emer McKenna, present
Francine Freitas, present	Kent Meyers, present
Jo Gonsalves, present	Gary Myrick, present
Darrin Greer, vice chair, present	Bob Reid, chair, present
Margaret Healy, excused	Janet Vitt, secretary, present
Linda Hill, present	Fr. Des O'Reilly, pastor
Melba Hinojosa, present	
Sue Kenney, present	

The special meeting was held to provide a briefing and discussion about on action taken during the Covid-19 Shelter-in-Place orders by the state and county.

Opening Prayer: Janet Vitt

Pastor's Report: Fr. Des briefed members of the Pastoral Council on the context of changes that were made to the Steps Ministry during the week of April 5-11.

He explained that because of the coronavirus pandemic, by mid-March the Steps Ministry found itself out of compliance with county and state health orders. The Steps guests were told on March 20 that the overnight accommodations in the courtyard would be coming to an end, although no specific date was set at that time. In subsequent days, many Steps volunteers voiced concerns about their health and of being in violation of health orders to stay at home, and volunteer participation started declining. Similar concerns were heard from volunteers who cleaned the courtyard in the mornings. In addition, some Steps volunteers were not following mandated precautions. Fr. Des said he realized the situation was untenable and for health reasons action had to be taken despite it being Holy Week.

On the evening of Sunday, April 5, the guests were told it would be their last night in the courtyard. Parish staff again contacted the city about the homeless guests needing help finding shelter.

At least one Steps volunteer on Tuesday contacted news media about the closure. No Steps volunteer approached Fr. Des or staff about to protest the decision to close the courtyard. Fr. Des did not speak on camera but offered answers though email.

By Tuesday evening, hotel rooms had been secured for any Steps guest who wanted one. The parish has been paying for the rooms, which were negotiated for a weekly rate. A GoFundMe site has been established but is not coordinated with the parish.

Jenny Jordan, a navigator with Sacramento Steps Forward (a non-profit organization seeking to end homelessness in Sacramento), has met with Steps guests at the hotel to outline their options get off the street and onto the path leading to permanent housing with access to services. She persuaded three of them to enter a city-sponsored program that provides transitional private rooms, three meals a day and support services, all without cost to the individual. That program will be a conduit to permanent housing. Two Steps guests said they found accommodation of their own. Five Steps guests have opted to remain at the hotel, saying they will wait to return to the courtyard, even though that may not be an option. Steps volunteers have been providing food for the five guests at the hotel. Ms. Jordan has also met with Fr. Des.

Fr. Des said he realized that many parish members and Steps volunteers felt they were out of the loop as the decision was made to close the courtyard. He said he wanted the parish to know that he made the decision solely on the basis of health concerns in light of the Covid-19 outbreak and that earlier discussions about the future focus of the Steps Ministry were not a factor. (Those discussions will continue.)

Questions and comments from Council members: A discussion followed by many council members. Below is a summary of comments.

- The decision to close the courtyard was the right one and the timing in Holy Week was unfortunate but should not have been a major consideration.
- After the Covid-19 precautionary orders are gone, the Steps Ministry needs to resume as a changed ministry. It does not operate as it was envisioned when it was started about 20 years ago and does not seem sustainable as it has been for a couple of years.
- The Ministry has not provided guidance to the guests to move beyond homelessness.
- There is opportunity now with attention from the state and city to address homelessness.
- The Pastoral Council is a resource for the pastor and staff to tap to help carry the burden of emergencies such as that of the Steps Ministry in a time of pandemic.
- While addressing the future Steps mission, we might want to look at all the building space at St. Francis.
- There was shock at how some volunteers reacted and things they posted, emailed or said to news media.
- Some Steps volunteers seem to perceive that there is a bottomless pot of funds that are for Steps. Others don't seem to understand that the guests have been offered housing by the city, offers that 5 of the guests have turned down.

- The funds bequeathed to the Parish that have helped support Steps also help with other outreach to the poor. Any checks that have been sent to the parish specifically to defray the costs of hotel rooms during the pandemic orders are being held in a separate account and not mingled with any other Steps or outreach costs.
- Many Steps volunteers and other parishioners agree that the decision, while hard, was the right one to make for the wellbeing of the guests, Steps volunteers and the cleaning volunteers.
- We as a parish need to find a way to more widely share information about this and other matters. Can we look for an email solution so that people who don't think to go looking on the website might receive updates? (Fr. Des explained that a new service, Flocknote, might be a resource for this.)
- The Pastoral Council committee that formed to look at Steps and other Outreach ministries was broadened to look at all the various ministries of the parish, and its work is about at an end and a report will be done. The coronavirus has made an imperative that the Steps and other Outreach ministries be assessed. What will be the focus of Steps once the Shelter-in-Place orders are lifted? Can we as a parish have a staff person (could be part-time) who would focus on outreach?

For the second half of meeting, the council was joined Finance Council members Judy Miranda, Mike Falasco, Dennis Mahoney and Beth Mullen.

The discussion continued about specific things to do next regarding the 5 guests at the hotel.

- The parish has committed to pay for the hotel for the 5 guests through at least May 6.
- There has been a decline in the number of Steps volunteers as reflected by the nearly continual request for help that appears in the church bulletin. There was always some turnover, but the numbers are noticeably down even as the number of guests have remained at maximum.
- A group from the Pastoral and Finance Councils would like to meet with Steps volunteers who are upset with the decision to hear their thoughts. That group will meet through Zoom and extend invitations soon.
- Jenny Jordan, the Sacramento Steps Forward navigator, has complimented the parish for its commitment, but feels Steps is a barrier to its long-term guests from being able to move toward housing solutions. She has encouraged the parish to explore cooperative efforts being made by other Midtown churches and non-profits to help solve homelessness. As safe a haven as the parish courtyard might seem, the Steps guests are

counted among the homeless of Sacramento, which means they do not have access to assistance that they could be getting. Ms. Jordan is ready to work with the parish as it discerns how Steps will proceed after the pandemic.

- In the future, Steps might serve a larger number of people by being a temporary overnight shelter as it was envisioned when it was formed. Or it might work with other churches as it provides space and gas other churches provide volunteer help.
- To have Ms. Jordan talking/working with Steps volunteers could expand the view of the future of the ministry.
- Aside from the Steps issue, it would be good if the councils could do outreach to members of the parish to check in during the Shelter-in-Place order and to share information about the streamed Masses and efforts regarding the Steps guests.

Closing Prayer: Led by Jo Gonsalves