

Honorable Mayor and Commissioners,
Sorry that I can't be here to talk about the Homeless Shelter in person but I will be at the Laser Spine Institute in Tampa. Unfortunately they only work on backs not brains.

Since I was involved with the location, design and construction of the KOTS facility I feel you and the present general public need to be reminded of why it was built , its design, construction and location.

Although various care organizations wanted to assist the homeless, the general population of Key West could care less. The homeless persons lived in squalor type conditions in the wetland areas of the City for years without any public outcry about their living conditions. The complaints being about their panhandling and presence in parks and other public places.

Through the efforts of Commissioner Merri Lee McCoy, various Environmental groups, and Key West Citizen reporters and photographers making the living conditions public, the wetlands where they lived was designated as an endangered wetlands by the State DEP. It was against the law to habitat in the endangered wetlands so the City gave the homeless written and verbal warnings and a set time to move out of the designated endangered wetlands.

They moved out on the Bridle Path on South Roosevelt boulevard and onto various public parks and places. Fortunately this really got the attention of of the general public. The City Commission had to correct the problem and ordered the City Manager to have city staff develop a solution.

The main problem was the result of a Federal Court decision named Pottenger which ruled that homeless persons had a right for a place to sleep and have bathroom facilities to be furnished by Public Governments or they could sleep and do their necessities on public property. The City of Miami was fined several million dollars and forced to provide facilities for the homeless. The City of Key West was threatened by this law suit.

I was assigned to find a solution to the problem. The City had limited funds and places to build restroom and a place for numerous persons to sleep uninterrupted out of the prohibited wetlands was very limited. Note an enclosed facility for them to sleep is not required by the law. Only for bathroom and sleeping with out being interrupted.

The only available sight in Key West proper was on the road to the sewage pump station off of Government road. There was room for a bathroom trailer and space to build eight Seminole Indian type “Chickees” on each side of the road. These would allow sleeping for over 200 persons. The area is near public transportation and close to the soup kitchen on Flagler Avenue. This was unfortunately in then Commissioner Bethels district and he strongly opposed it and at a public meeting in his district over two hundred persons attended The public out cry forced us to look at our only other practical option. The Monroe County Detention Center on Stock Island.(We had a good price from a Seminole Indian tribe vendor to build the 'Chickees”and did not need a permit from the State). A “Chickee” being an raised shelter where persons sleep on the floor.

Sheriff Roth had several surplus military tents and enough space to construct what is now KOTS. Note the “Chickee”sleeping on the floor principle is adapted in the KOTS tents for men. Donated trailers with bunks are provided for women. My testimony on building this facility is before the court. Unfortunately I will be in Tampa for the announcement of a settlement.

I do not recommend closing KOTS. However if you do the tents, bathroom and present sleeping trailers should be relocated on the Easter Seals site. Hopefully the prisoners could still be utilized for daily cleanup.

Closing the facility without providing an alternate ready to use facility will trigger Pottenger and allow the homeless to move back on government owned property. I know several sharp lawyers waiting for this to happen. The homeless could probably even be allowed to sleep on the City owned golf course.

Mayor Cates proposal to use the March of Dimes property is excellent and the solution to the homeless situation is more important than the Mosquito Boards use of City property that they are leasing. We need a place that the homeless can spend time during the day and seek rehabilitation but only need to meet the conditions of Pottenger by furnishing the minimum required facilities and pass time limits for occupancy and strict legal rules and laws to encourage the homeless to leave. After a certain time we should look for legal means to furnish bus tickets back to where the outsiders came from.

The law does not require we build a facility with indoor sleeping facilities with bunk beds. This would cost millions. The requirement is to provide an area to sleep uninterrupted and provide bathroom facilities. The present KOTS facilities meet these requirements. We do not want a Key West Homeless Club Med.

John Jones
1024 James Street
Key West, Fl 33040