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Editorial

## Left in the cold

### City's fairweather policies need overhaul

**A**s plummeting temperatures hit Gainesville this week, securing a bed in area homeless shelters has become a hotter commodity than the SC presidency.

The unforgiving chill of Tuesday evening saw more than 90 homeless people descend upon the St. Francis House for a place to stay as the mercury dropped below 45 degrees.

So much for coming to Gainesville for the weather. The Editorial Board has the utmost respect for the area shelters working around the clock to meet the needs of Gainesville's homeless population, but we must concede not enough is being done to help them.

We aren't talking about UF students refusing to part with their spare change or crossing the street to avoid confrontation with a homeless person. Rather, we take issue with the city for failing to deliver on its promises of a one-stop homeless shelter for Gainesville — a place with plenty of room that can open its doors regardless of the weather.

Just because the temperature may be over 45 degrees doesn't exactly bode for pleasant conditions on the street.

We urge the city of Gainesville to stop treating the homeless as second-class citizens and move forward with their plans to build a shelter. Give this ever-growing demographic of our population a chance to reclaim their lives and break free from the cyclical nature of their existence.

It's so easy to turn a blind eye — but is it really so much harder to make a difference?

# If not there, where?

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**W**eather forecasters say it will be extraordinarily cold for the next few nights. The call has already gone out for donations of clothing and blankets for the homeless. And the St. Francis House will almost certainly find itself in violation of city-imposed restrictions on the numbers of homeless it may feed and shelter.

There's nothing new about that. The city's restrictions regarding homeless services are in many ways unrealistic and often ignored. Regulations or no, the next few nights will especially test this community's compassion toward the homeless.

The St. Francis House has been caring for the homeless for more than two decades. This year its operating permit is up for renewal. No doubt, business advocates will urge that the permit not be extended, arguing that St. Francis' mission clashes with the city's goal of revitalizing downtown.

It does of course. But we've been through this debate many times over the years. And as always, the issue regarding the St. Francis House comes down to a single question: If not there, where?

Where else will the St. Francis House be welcomed? What other neighborhood or business district will embrace it? City commissioners well know the answer to that question from years of struggling to site homeless service facilities.

We have often taken the position that downtown Gainesville has done more than its fair share for

the homeless. The city's attempt to establish a one-stop homeless center someplace other than downtown is a step in the right direction. And if the day ever arrives when that center becomes a reality, there is reason to hope that it will take at least some of the burden off downtown entities like the St. Francis House and the Salvation Army.

But that day hasn't arrived yet. And we can't believe the City Commission will seriously consider denying a permit renewal for the St. Francis House, especially with the economy in free-fall and the ranks of the homeless growing.

Over the next several nights, there will be a scramble to make sure that homeless individuals have a place to escape the freezing weather. Compassion demands it. But day in and day out, the St. Francis House provides a vital service. Practicality demands that it be allowed to continue to do so.

There will always be tensions between downtown business interests and homeless service providers like the St. Francis House and Salvation Army. The city has a responsibility to try to mediate those tensions and lessen conflicts to the greatest extent possible.

Since its very inception, the "anywhere but here" debate has swirled around the St. Francis House. But as much as downtown advocates might wish for the St. Francis House to be located elsewhere, the essential question remains unanswered: If not there, where?