

https://billingsgazette.com/opinion/editorial/gazette-opinion-make-room-for-maap-to-work-again-in/article_c62c39cd-9552-52f6-9c3e-3f49fdb44020.html

GAZETTE OPINION

Gazette opinion: Make room for MAAP to work again in Billings

Jun 8, 2018

SALE! SIGN UP AND GET 90% OFF



DBA Director Katy Easton is shown in the skybridge overlooking North Broadway.

LARRY MAYER, Gazette Staff

Billings and Yellowstone County leaders must act now to stop the wave of intoxication and street crime that threatens our community.

The increase in open container violations, trespass and public urination is being seen throughout our city. Some of the problem is concentrated downtown where business owners are concerned about losing business and keeping employees safe. As reported last week by The Gazette's Mike Ferguson, Downtown Billings Alliance Executive Director Katy Easton has a stack of letters from worried business owners.

Officers are seeing more people who "come to Billings to party. This is their Vegas. They are aggressive and they know they aren't going to jail," Police Chief Rich St. John told the Yellowstone County Commission on May 31.

“We have had too many close calls in recent weeks, and we are asking for assistance before something happens that will scare our patrons from coming to the museum,” the new Yellowstone Art Museum executive director, Bryan Knicely, wrote to County Commission Chairman John Ostlund.

Both Easton, who spoke at the Community Innovations meeting, and the police chief support the Motivated Addictions Alternate Program that started working three years ago to get adults who were habitually intoxicated in public and frequently accessing emergency care off the streets of Billings and into treatment. The program was successful in helping dozens of “serial inebriates.”

MAAP lost a critical tool when beds at county jail were no longer available because of overcrowding. When the program had five dedicated beds, Municipal Court Judge Sheila Kolar could give repeat offenders the choice of treatment or jail. Most eventually chose treatment.

More recently, there is no consequence for those who refuse treatment because the jail is full. Habitually intoxicated transients and others camping on our streets know they won't be incarcerated for minor crimes so they are not deterred from drinking and offending again and again.

The time has come to restore MAAP. The increase in public drinking and the bad behavior that goes with it diminish all of us. The situation is unsafe for the intoxicated who are at risk for becoming victims of crime and who all too often have been injured by walking into traffic. Street crime detracts from the quality of life that Billings residents want for ourselves and all our visitors.

The jail is overcrowded with close to 500 prisoners on most days. It won't be easy to make room for MAAP, but it is essential to public health and safety and as a preventive measure. Better to steer minor repeat offenders into sobriety than to wait till people have committed felonies.

Along with draining law enforcement and court resources, these habitual offenders are hugely expensive for local emergency medical services. Firefighters, American Medical Response ambulances and hospital emergency departments care for intoxicated individuals who fall down or pass out on the streets.

The May 13 Gazette opinion called on city, county and court leaders to collaborate on a plan to get MAAP back on track with dedicated jail space. We renew that call: Even one or two slots would be a big help.

City, county and court officials have come together before to make good jail population management decisions to keep the public safe and to minimize taxpayer expenses. We believe that our judges, commissioners, St. John and Sheriff Mike Linder can make MAAP a priority by reserving a little space for this important program.

We absolutely aren't advocating to lock up more people. This is a plea to reserve a few county jail slots for BPD and Municipal Court to use judiciously to motivate serial inebriates to help themselves with effective substance abuse treatment.

Our city and county leaders must provide the tools needed to maintain safe and inviting streets.

This is a plea to reserve a few county jail slots for BPD and Municipal Court to use judiciously to motivate serial inebriates to help themselves with effective substance abuse treatment.

MORE INFORMATION



Jail overcrowding hindering innovative addiction treatment program in Billings

- Gazette opinion: Curbing Billings' street crime crisis
- New outreach coordinator aims to curb the number of serial inebriates in downtown Billings
- Gazette opinion: Billings partnership yields sobering success
-  This week's letters to the editor: Religious freedom, socialism and the great wall of Canada?
- Gazette opinion: Keep murder rare in Billings
- Gazette opinion: Public safety vital to Billings economic development