

The Oregonian

Homelessness: Portland mayor quietly tolerating tent camping

By Brad Schmidt

01/29/2016

Portland's homelessness crisis has become acutely visible over the past seven weeks because Mayor Charlie Hales quietly directed police to mostly stop enforcing anti-camping rules prohibiting tents.

The undisclosed policy shift has been something of an open secret among emboldened homeless Portlanders but is frustrating some residents and business leaders, who this week demanded an explanation from Hales.

The reprieve is temporary until new rules can be considered next month, Hales told The Oregonian/OregonLive on Thursday. He declined to discuss the proposed changes but hopes they'll provide balanced enforcement with new options for the nearly 1,900 residents estimated to sleep on the streets each night.

"We are in a transition," Hales said in an interview. "But it's a deliberate transition from playing whack-a-mole from having sweeps all the time."

Portland's visible surge in tents stems from the City Council's declared housing emergency last fall and new federal guidance discouraging the criminalization of homelessness. Portland's current anti-camping rules are inhumane, Hales said, because they force homeless people to move from one place to another without any direction about where they can legally go.

Recognizing the need for change, Hales in December deputized his top aide to approve all homeless sweeps until new rules are crafted. As a result, police are now leniently enforcing tent rules except in cases of blatant law-breaking or extremely large camps.

That decision has encouraged a flock of new tents inside some city parks and along busy sidewalks, upsetting residents and business owners left confused about the city's long-term strategy. And it's created nervous energy among local politicians who worry that Hales' plan hasn't been vetted and could create a public backlash.

"They should be enforcing the laws that exist," said Sandra McDonough, president of the Portland Business Alliance. "If there's a change going on around that, around enforcement, they should be communicating that."

Hales will propose changes at a Feb. 8 City Council work session, but it's not immediately clear what they'll be or how they'll work. Portland's mayor, in his final year of office, said he wants to gauge support from city commissioners before publicly rolling out details. Any proposal will likely focus on the concept of "safe sleeping" rather than camping.

"I hope the new system offers balance and proportionality," Hales said, "that we will intervene on the street where the livability effects are egregious."

Homelessness in Portland hasn't dipped in recent years despite renewed political attention and its status as a central theme in this year's mayoral race.

Hales last year joined with Multnomah County Chairwoman Deborah Kafoury to pledge \$30 million toward housing and homelessness in 2016, and the city has opened 275 new shelter beds in recent months. Hales also authorized the Hazelnut Grove camp site in North Portland and is trying to find a permanent home for the Right 2 Dream Too camp, which opened in 2011.

But when the City Council unanimously declared a housing emergency in October, officials didn't hint that camping changes could be in the works. It wasn't until Dec. 10 when the mayor's chief of staff, Josh Alpert, began considering a new approach.

Homeless advocates frantically dialed Alpert's cell phone that morning questioning why campers were being roused amid heavy rains. From that point forward, Alpert began approving homeless sweeps on city-owned property.

Some unruly camps have been disbanded, according to the mayor's office, including one where two stabbings were reported in 10 days.

"Rumors that it's the wild west are not only greatly exaggerated, they're simply wrong," Hales said.

But many homeless Portlanders have recognized that police no longer require tents to come down at daybreak.

Along Southwest Naito Parkway, for instance, seven tents lined the sidewalk underneath the Morrison Bridge at noon Thursday.

"They're not making us take 'em down," said Melissa Sayson, sitting inside her red-and-gray tent. "It's a lot less work and hassle."

A similar scene is playing out in other neighborhoods.

A large homeless encampment underneath the Steel Bridge prompted nearby condo owners to take matters into their own hands, blocking access to a public trail along the Willamette River. City officials have threatened legal action.

Meanwhile, residents who complained a week ago about a homeless camp in Sellwood Park are still waiting.

"It's not clear to us what's being done," said Jessica Almeida, 36, who made the complaint to Commissioner Amanda Fritz. "Is there a timeline? I think people are pretty much understanding if they know what's happening, they know what they're waiting for. ... Just be honest with everybody."

Inside the park, about 100 yards from a play area, two campers have set up a vast collection of belongings inside an old pavilion. One of the campers, who identified himself as Floyd, said he lost his painting job last year after a knee injury and has been homeless since.

Floyd said park rangers and police know he's been living there for months. His tent is new, he said, but no one has complained since it's gone up.

"They asked us to do everything we can to not piss the people off," he said, gesturing to nearby homes.

Fritz, who oversees Portland Parks & Recreation, said Thursday that "camping in parks is not allowed." The complaint has been referred to Hales' office for enforcement, she said.

Residents such as Almeida have been told to log objections online. Portland has created a website to track complaints, although its existence hasn't been publicized. Since Jan. 5, the city has received 178 complaints about 12 sites, according to the mayor's spokeswoman.

The Portland Business Alliance has also logged more direct gripes with Hales. In a letter this week, McDonough asked the city to clarify what appears to be "an extreme departure from past policy" that suggests the city is "turning a blind eye to camping."

Hales said he's now "done" trying to move homeless people from place to place, something he first attempted in 2013 when he hoped to shoo away campers in sleeping bags outside City Hall. Federal authorities last summer questioned that strategy in Boise, Idaho, Hales said, and he wants to be "more humane and smart with our resources."

Whether he'll have political support is unclear.

Commissioner Nick Fish said Thursday he's received little information about Hales' plan.

Fish said he's concerned about public health and safety for campers and nearby residents. He's also worried that widespread complaints will jeopardize efforts to approve a ballot measure this fall to raise taxes for affordable housing.

"We seem to be making it up now as we go along," Fish said, "and I think that's a big mistake."

At a makeshift campsite in Creston Park, homeless Portlander Laura King figures she eventually will be forced to leave but is grateful for the recent peace.

Homeless for two years, King said she and her girlfriend began camping in the Southeast Portland park sometime after Thanksgiving. At one point, parks officials told them they couldn't camp on nearby tennis courts, she said, but no one has told them to go.

"Hopefully," she said, "it'll last as long as they'll let us stay here."

Portland's arts tax is a good thing (OPINION)

By Guest Columnist, Stanley Penkin

01/27/2016

While The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board continually opines on its displeasure with the Arts Education and Access Fund (AEAF), countless children across our entire city are now benefiting from access to an arts education, many for the first time. Observing a little boy exploring his imagination and taking pride in creating his first painting, or the little girl learning

to play an instrument and delighting in its sound, speaks volumes to the side of the story not being told by the major newspaper in our city.

Passed by 62 percent of the voters in 2012, the AEF was designed to bring arts teachers to all of our K-5 students, help our cherished arts institutions with their operational needs and to provide funding for access grants to small organizations and projects, primarily in underserved and often neglected communities.

Yes, some unanticipated changes were made when the AEF was implemented, but that is not at all unusual for any new initiative. The \$35 that individuals pay is immeasurably leveraged by the positive consequences that are derived now and into the future.

Before the fund was implemented, Portland's six school districts had a total of 30 arts teachers in their K-5 elementary schools. Thousands of children, especially from poor neighborhoods, did not have the opportunity to pick up a crayon or a paint brush that would help to unleash their creativity and allow them to see the world in a new and exciting way. As of last year (latest figures are not yet available), our K-5 arts teachers numbered 83 with all districts meeting or exceeding the mandated requirements of the teacher-to-student ratio. In addition, the AEF urges school districts to carry arts curriculum forward to all grades beyond K-5. The evidence is clear that this is happening, making for a greater coordinated effort for children of all ages.

As for our arts institutions, most of which struggle financially because that is simply the nature of the arts, the additional operating support makes the difference between some of them surviving or not. In a city and region that has traditionally provided far less arts funding than other comparable cities across the nation, the AEF has been instrumental in supporting arts and culture that is essential to the well-being of our city.

The editorial board states that the AEF does not provide a core function. That is shortsighted; arts and culture speak to the heart, soul and spirit of a community. While the arts are a major driver of economic development, including jobs and tourism, they also foster community, creativity, innovation and pride. Imagine our lives without thriving museums, galleries, music, dance and theater. Think of all the creative people who work for and guide those institutions and all the energy, innovative spirit and creativity they instill. Think of the opportunities opened up to communities of color and other underserved people across our great city. Envision the void in our kids' lives if the arts were not an essential ingredient of their education, especially in the formative years when ideas and dreams begin to form.

Without all the riches the arts add to our community, we would be a barren wilderness lacking spirit and soul. We would be a city and a region without a meaningful identity. That is the other side of the story!

The Portland Mercury

In Other News

By Mercury staff

01/27/2016

WITH A FOUR-YEAR, 10-cent-per-gallon gas tax likely to pop up on this year's primary ballot, Portland transportation advocates are gearing up for what could be an uphill slog toward May 17.

A group calling itself Fix Our Streets Portland says it will urge voters to support the new tax, which could snatch up \$16 million a year. Most of that money (56 percent) would go toward paving, but the tax would also pay for sidewalk construction, protected bike lanes, and more. Fix Our Streets' efforts will serve as a counterpoint to an opposition campaign planned by the local fuels industry.

The pro-tax campaign isn't offering many details about its plans or backers, but it's likely Fix Our Streets will resemble a coalition of organizations that teamed up in 2014 to (unsuccessfully) urge city officials to pass a progressive "street fee" to pay for road repairs.

That coalition included Oregon Walks, OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, and 1,000 Friends of Oregon. Aaron Brown, president of the Oregon Walks board, is managing the Fix Our Streets campaign. DIRK VANDERHART

Hall Monitor

Will Portland Neighborhoods Invite Homeless Camps?

By Dirk VanderHart

01/27/2016

THE TIRELESS FAITHFUL who make up the North Tabor Neighborhood Association found themselves being tugged in different directions when they convened earlier this month.

Before the group were two proposals for how North Tabor—and every other Portland neighborhood—should respond to what many think is an inevitability: the spread of organized encampments beyond the small enclaves of downtown's Right 2 Dream Too and Overlook's Hazelnut Grove.

First, the North Tabor group had a form letter sent along by the Overlook Neighborhood Association (OKNA). The Overlookers have been fighting to oust the Hazelnut Grove camp from its city-owned perch on North Greeley, with no success.

So the OKNA has come up with a list of demands for Mayor Charlie Hales' office it hopes other associations sign onto. Most are reasonable—asking the city to require sanctioned camps to

abide by a code of conduct, for instance, or setting a maximum occupancy on any organized encampments that emerge as the city grapples with its housing crisis.

But one provision of the letter has seemed universally odious to people I've talked to around the city.

The OKNA wants Hales' assurance that the city will take down the full legal name of anyone who stays in a permitted camp. That would result in publicly available lists, allowing neighbors to conduct their own vigilante background checks for anyone at a city-sanctioned camp.

"It's not practical," says Terry Dublinski-Milton, a board member for the North Tabor group. "If I would have said, 'Let's vote on the Overlook letter [at January's meeting],' it would have been a resounding no."

Some other neighborhood associations have reached similar conclusions, opting to drop the OKNA letter without a vote.

But there's another document making the rounds. This one comes from the city's Coalition Directors and Chairs committee, a group made up of staffers and board members from Portland's seven neighborhood coalitions.

The document—kept purposefully low-key over the past months—is a draft vision for how Portland's neighborhoods might react to more organized homeless camps. And it's a lot more pragmatic than the OKNA's offering.

"While few consider camps the ideal, coalitions recognize that, regardless, makeshift camps exist in all districts throughout the city," reads the proposal.

So the committee seems on the verge of suggesting something radical for our fair city's neighborhoods: That they actually help figure out where the homeless might stay, rather than digging in their heels.

A key element of the draft calls on each neighborhood coalition to "facilitate a process for identifying sites within their boundaries for temporary shelters or camps." A similar proposal, since essentially scrapped, would have gone further still—asking each coalition to find three potential campsites.

"I don't think anyone disagrees that there's an emergency," says Anne Dufay, executive director of Southeast Uplift, the coalition that represents many SE Portland neighborhoods. "At this point the conversation is about what makes sense, and how can we be involved."

Again, it's a draft proposal. There won't be solid conclusions anytime soon.

But the document's another signal that Portland's perhaps no longer satisfied with policies that do little more than shunt people from neighborhood to neighborhood.

In a city where every tent has long been a looming controversy, that's a big deal.