

More homeless finding refuge downtown



Tents line the sidewalk in front of the ARCHES building on Commercial Street in Salem Thursday. The tents have spread to the sidewalk across the street from ARCHES as well. PHOTOS BY KELLY JORDAN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Sweep of parks, cold weather brings campers closer to heat, services

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USA TODAY NETWORK

More than three dozen tents and tarps housing about 60 people line the perimeter of the ARCHES Project day center.

The tents are just one part of a recent surge in homeless encampments in downtown Salem, and advocates say that number will only grow as the nights grow colder and the Willamette River swells.

An influx of campers in the winter isn't a new trend. Jimmy Jones, executive director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, which oversees ARCHES, said those living on the street and camping in parks tend to migrate closer to the city's core to be near services and warming shelters.

But this year, recent sweeps at encampments in Wallace Marine Park and



In addition to tents, there are shopping carts, bicycles and other items lining the streets.

Cascades Gateway Park have pushed even more of the homeless population into the heart of the city, making the tents, sleeping bags and tarps more visible.

This, paired with a recent ruling from the city on who owns the landscaping strips outside ARCHES, has

See TENTS, Page 4A

Tents

Continued from Page 1A

led many to set up camp outside the day center at 615 Commercial St. NE.

Jones said that when the center — which provides meals, housing services, hygiene kits, mailboxes and telephone access — moved to the building in July 2017, officials agreed the landscaping strips along the streets were the property of ARCHES and the agency could enforce trespassing laws on them.

ARCHES officials wanted to be a good neighbor to nearby businesses who were concerned about the impact of having a day center for the homeless nearby.

But about three months ago, the Salem city attorney ruled that those strips of land were public property, making ARCHES staff powerless to enforce any camping bans.

City spokeswoman Kathy Ursprung said the law was already in place, and the city simply provided clarification. She stressed the move had “no political motivation.”

But without a camping ban in place, the number of tents along the streets at ARCHES grew every week.

Bob Elliott recently wrote to the Statesman Journal to voice concern about the growing row of tents and tarps.

“As a citizen, I’m disappointed that as a community we cannot help with the homeless camping issue,” he said. “No one wants a ‘homeless camp’ in their backyard.”

After being kicked out of Wallace Marine, those camping have moved on, leaving the day center caught in the middle, Elliott said. The city needs to address the issue instead of just scrambling to close camps one after another and never solving the heart of the issue.

“No action by the city is not the answer,” he added.

Sit-lie ban controversial

Elliott is not the only resident to raise the alarm.

“We have received complaints and are concerned about public health and safety in the growing camping occurring at Commercial and Union Streets,” Salem City Manager Steve Powers said in a statement. “Homelessness is particularly visible right now in our downtown but is occurring throughout our community.”



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He said city leaders are working to find solutions that “consider the health and safety of our unsheltered neighbors and impacts on the community.”

One of those solutions could include prohibiting camping. Currently, the Salem Revised Code does not have a provision that prohibits tent camping on sidewalks and landscaping on the public right of way.

The Salem City Council is expected to vote Monday on a proposed ban against sitting and lying on city sidewalks.

As it stands, the proposed ordinance would bar people from sitting and lying on public sidewalks from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It also would restrict setting up encampments on sidewalks and leaving personal belongings unattended for more than 24 hours.

Councilors at a work session this week discussed potential changes. Councilor Cara Kaser brought up the encampment near ARCHES, asking city staff if any rules prohibit such activity.

“No, not that I’m aware of,” responded Salem Police Chief Jerry Moore. “You can probably erect a tent or a camp almost anywhere on a sidewalk, in front of a business, and if it’s not completely blocking the sidewalk, I don’t think there’s anything we can do about it.”

Moore said the ordinance would give police a reason to approach someone who is homeless. The first thing police would do is attempt to get the homeless person in touch with services, he said.

The police chief described some of the homeless who have camped in the city as “very service-resistant.” He said those people “don’t want to follow rules” or go somewhere “they know they can’t do drugs or drink or whatever.”

“People are just tired of it,” Moore said. “And those are the complaints and the calls that we get all the time.”

Sweeps and evictions

Recent sweeps and evictions have pushed dozens of encampments out of less visible areas like a swath of private quarry land near Wallace Marine Park and the riverbank in Minto-Brown Island Park.

Many of those displaced either can’t or won’t go to a homeless shelter like the Union Gospel Mission.

Sometimes their drug addictions and behaviors prohibit them from being there. Others have pets. And some don’t want to be separated from their partner. Other times, being in a shelter can trigger or worsen a mental health crisis.

Management at Union Gospel Mission Men’s Mission said the shelter is not yet at capacity. But with a cold snap forecasted for next week and the looming threat of snow, the facility’s 200 beds and mats could quickly fill up, said guest services manager Rick Bratton.

“I believe we’ll go into capacity,” he said.

Bratton said many of those living in tents remain outside as temperatures dip below freezing, but those sleeping completely exposed in sleeping bags on sidewalks typically seek shelter.

The Men’s Mission usually can sleep about 150 people a night. In November, they add about 50 mats to accommodate people in the cold, rainy season.

A new shelter scheduled to be opened in early 2021 will double the mission’s typical capacity to 300, Bratton said.

1,800 homeless people

Advocates estimate there about 1,800 homeless people within Salem’s urban growth boundary at any given time. The most visible group in that population are those camping and

Continued on next page