



Virgil Simons, 36, pets his dog while sitting outside his tent in Marion Square Park under the Marion Street Bridge on Front Street NE in Salem on Thursday. Simons has been homeless in Salem for 23 years.

PHOTOS BY MICHAELA ROMÁN/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Salem will clear out bridge encampment

No permits for feeding homeless at site after 'reports of crime, vermin'

Jonathan Bach and Virginia Barreda Salem Statesman Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Salem is banning local volunteers from feeding the homeless under the Marion Street bridge, halting the longstanding tradition at the same time as city officials prepare to clear out campers at the bridge by Tuesday.

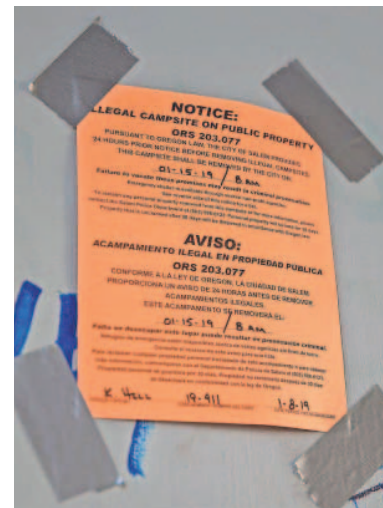
City Manager Steve Powers told the Statesman Journal he has asked Salem's public works director to stop issuing permits for distributing food "until an evaluation of impacts on city property is completed."

"The evaluation will include input from those who have been issued permits in the past," Powers said.

Jimmy Jones, executive director of the nearby Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency, said volunteers who have hosted dinnertime meals at the bridge will be allowed to do so on the ARCHES Project parking lot starting this weekend.

"I don't want to let people go without a place to eat," he said. But he stressed that people will not be allowed to camp in the parking lot.

See **HOMELESS**, Page 3A



A notice put up by the city of Salem warns those living under the Marion Street Bridge that illegal campsites will be removed.

Homeless

CONTINUED FROM HOMELESS
ON PAGE [A1](#)

Continued from Page 1A

Officials posted a warning earlier this week that they would be clearing out the homeless encampment under the bridge, where an estimated 15 to 30 people sleep at night.

“The cleanup will be done in coordination with social service agencies to provide access to services and shelter so people have appropriate alternatives to camping under the bridges,” Powers said.

Salem has been grappling with how to deal with the city’s downtown homeless population. In 2017, the Salem City Council considered a proposed sit-lie ordinance that would have banished the homeless from downtown sidewalks during the night. Councilors rejected the proposal after intense public outcry.

That same year, city officials also removed downtown benches that the homeless had used for camping, a move city spokesman Kenny Larson called “a last resort” after failed attempts to encourage people to stop. The Union Gospel Mission of Salem, which serves homeless men near the Willamette River bridges, is preparing to move to a location further north near the new Salem police headquarters. The city of Salem has already agreed to purchase the mission’s current property.

Salem has launched a homeless rental assistance program that has seen dozens of people, who’ve been deemed the most vulnerable in the

days, the fencing started being vandalized. They trashed the fence. They didn’t like the fencing at all,” he said.

Within about a month, volunteers noticed it became hard to keep the area tidy, he said. As the months progressed, people started setting up tents.

“It just grew exponentially,” Sheets said. “It got to where you just couldn’t even reach the garbage cans and there was literally a community of 20 to 30 people now.”

Conditions have become “very inhumane,” he said. “That’s why the city is stepping in,” he said. “I wished they would have stepped in earlier to try to stop the growth early on. I think that would have been a better strategy.”

Lt. Treven Upkes with the Salem Police Department acknowledged the pilot program hadn’t worked as hoped.

“It was our attempt to create a better, safer, more humane space for people that needed it to get that food and to get those services,” Upkes said. “Unintended consequences occurred and now we’re having to deal with that.”

“But it was done with the best of intentions to make it a better place for the people that we know have been there for 15 years,” he said.

Campers unsure where to go

On Thursday, tents lined up side by side with blankets draped over some. Several bicycles were around, as was a small dog. People walked in and out of camp.

Moore says she sometimes walks to the mall to charge her phone when the camp gets overwhelming.

“It’s hard to stay here,” she said. “You go crazy if you don’t get out.”

Since the notice was posted Tuesday, Moore plans to return home when she gets her next paycheck.

“Now I’m kind of wishing I stayed home when I went for Thanksgiving,” she said.

—*Michaela Román of the Statesman Journal contributed reporting.*

Email jbach@statesmanjournal.com, call (503) 399-6714 or follow on Twitter [@jonathanmbach](https://twitter.com/jonathanmbach).

Email vbarreda@statesmanjournal.com, call (503) 399-6657 or follow on Twitter [@vbarreda2](https://twitter.com/vbarreda2).



Virgil Simons takes a bowl out of his tent in Marion Square Park under the Marion

Virgil Simons takes a bowl out of his tent in Marion Square Park under the Marion Street Bridge on Front Street NE on Thursday. Simmons is one of 15 who sleep under the bridge and are being cleared out by the city.

homeless population, get off the streets and into housing.

City leaders have allocated \$1.4 million in the last two budgets for the program, but the size of those payments may be re-examined as Salem faces several multi-million-dollar budget shortfalls in coming years.

Salem Mayor Chuck Bennett, who unveiled the program two years ago at his State of the City address, told the Statesman Journal the service “is part of our long term strategy to deal with homelessness,” and it is “sustainable.”

Powers said the bridge cleanups are being carried out “to protect the health and safety of those choosing to camp under the bridges.

“What Salem has learned from programs like HRAP is that homeless are often sick, weak, and vulnerable,” he said.

“We will be adding barriers to the area under both bridges to discourage a repeat of the what is occurring,” Powers said.

One camp resident hopes he and others can save their camp by banding together. Virgil Simons, 36, said he hasn’t put too much thought into where he’ll go after Tuesday.

“If we can clean this place up by the 15th, and show them that we’re making progress, hopefully there will be a chance,” he said.

Should that fail, Simons is going to find a new spot, but he’s not taking everyone with him. “I’ll bring the ones that need help, not the ones that cause trouble,” he said.

Program for meals ‘not successful’

People staying there take shifts keeping watch over the camp throughout the night to ensure nothing is stolen.

A Salem police officer stopped by and began talking to some camp residents. He told the Statesman Journal he checks on the camp every once in a while: chats with them, gives them cigarettes and makes sure they’re safe.

Debbra and Kevin Graham live on his disabled veteran benefits and have been staying at the homeless encampment under the Marion Street bridge since Wednesday.

They’ve been together for nearly 36 years after meeting in the U.S. Army when she was 18 and he was 20.

“We knew each other a week, and he asked me to marry him and I laughed in his face,” Debbra Graham, 54, said. “And the next week we were married.”

Two years ago, the couple was sleeping on the sidewalks in front of businesses and in West Salem parks.

When Kevin, 56, was taken to Marion County Jail on fourth-degree assault and menacing charges against his wife in 2017, Debbra moved in with some cousins until he was released in November 2018 and they got back together.

“The people that are on the outside looking in, they look at you like you’re so beneath them,” Graham said. “All you can say is ‘you have no idea what it’s like until you’ve traveled in my shoes or in anyone else’s shoes out here.’ I don’t like living like this. I don’t like having to go days without showers, and it bothers me.”



Bikes, personal belongings and trash crowd the edge of Marion Square Park under the Marion Street Bridge on Thursday.

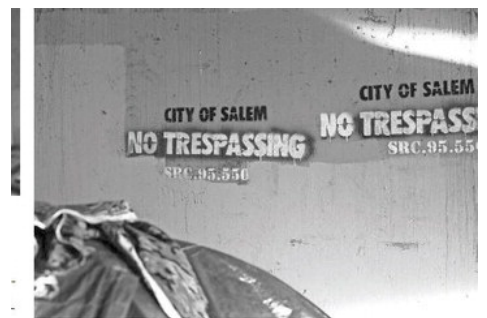
Bikes, personal belongings and trash crowd the edge of Marion Square Park under the Marion Street Bridge on Thursday.

PHOTOS BY MICHAELA ROMÁN/STATESMAN JOURNAL



Deborah Graham, 54, sits outside her tent at Marion Square Park under the

Deborah Graham, 54, sits outside her tent at Marion Square Park under the Marion Street Bridge.



“City of Salem no trespassing” warnings are painted under the Marion Street Bridge. People living under the bridge in tents are being asked by the city to leave.

In a press release announcing the cleanup, Powers said: “Conditions under the bridge have deteriorated to the point that it is no longer safe for people to be there.”

City officials said they have gotten “reports of crime, vermin, and activities that violate Salem Revised Code.”

“These behaviors, and the unsafe and unsanitary conditions in the area, confirm last year’s pilot effort to provide a single location for food distribution to the homeless was not successful,” officials said in the release.

However, Dan Sheets, who works part-time at radio station KSLM, said he has been helping coordinate meals under the bridge for 15 years. He said they usually serve 100 to 150 people a night.

The service has been operating under city permits.

“It’s grown to where there’s a dinner meal served there every day,” Sheets said. “We’re all rogues. We all do this on our own.”

For many years, people stood up and ate their meals, threw their plate in the garbage and left, he said. They’ve done it “with pretty much no problems.”

Last year, city officials put together **OUR HOMELESS CRISIS** is an occasional series by the Statesman Journal on homelessness in Marion and Polk counties.

■ See the entire series at Statesman-Journal.com/homeless.

eight picnic tables with fencing around the tables, he said. “Within a few

Graham knows the trash surrounding the tents is a problem, but often, her neighbors have no choice but to let it pile up, she said.

“There aren’t enough facilities for trash,” she said. “And there’s no bathroom down here.”

Graham said her attempts to secure housing through ARCHES and the VA for her and her husband have been unsuccessful.

The Graham’s have a son in Fort Myers, Florida, but moving in with him is not an option.

“He’s got his own life,” she said.

After the camp is cleaned out Tuesday, Graham said she will have no place to go.

Simons, of California, said he does his best to keep the peace between his neighbors under the Marion Street bridge.

“I stop all the fights, drugs, fires,” he said. “And so far, it’s going well, but they sneak up on me once in a while.”

Simons has lived at the park for the last week and a half, but has been a Salem resident since 1995.

“I’ve spent a lot of years around this park,” he said. “It’s like a second home to me and I’m going to lose it because people can’t put their head on straight and be respectful.”

Rebecca Moore, 30, came to the homeless camp under the Marion Street bridge with her boyfriend, but she was left behind when he was taken to jail.

She was unable to get home and decided to stay in the camp.



Virgil Simons, 36, says he has been homeless in Salem for 23 years.

When she first arrived, there weren't as many people, but now, "there's garbage everywhere, people are always fighting ... it makes my anxiety go skyhigh."

People in the camp fight about money, drugs and stolen property, she said.