

Homeless camp cleanups next month

Police to be on standby to assist those displaced

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USA TODAY NETWORK

More Salem homeless camp sweeps will come in early October. Officials have posted notifications in the areas of Wallace Marine Park, Costco Wholesale and the corner of 35th Place NE and Fisher Road NE.

State officials plan to clear the camps Oct. 7-9, though schedules for each location were not available, said Oregon Department of Transportation spokeswoman Angela Beers Seydel.

Officials informed the homeless of the cleanups by posting notifications

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Sept. 24, she said, after complaints came in about the camps. The homeless are believed to have established about a dozen camps across the three areas, Beers Seydel said.

Jimmy Jones, executive director of the Mid-Wilamette Valley Community Action Agency, said about 15 people live at the Wallace Marine Park camp. He wasn't sure how many lived at the other camps. "We have plans to visit those areas with outreach teams next week," Jones said.

When officials clear homeless camps, people living there are typically forced to leave. In the past, transportation officials have held onto belongings at a maintenance facility in southeast Salem so the homeless have time to collect them.

However, when local officials cleared a homeless camp of about 15 to 30 people under the Marion Street bridge early this year, city workers hauled away about 16 dump trucks' worth of garbage. Both police and social services providers were present at that sweep.

ODOT is supposed to coordinate cleanups with advocates after a 2018 camp cleanup came just before an annual point-in-time count to tally the region's homeless. Clearing the camps at the time made "it difficult for homeless service providers to complete an accurate count," then-ODOT Director Matthew Garrett told agency workers in a memo.

Agency spokesman Lou Torres notified the Community Action Agency of the October cleanups, Beers Seydel said.

"We are responsible for the maintenance of ODOT property on behalf of the citizens of Oregon," Beers Seydel said. "Maintenance activities such as mowing, road repair, culvert cleaning, trash cleanup, and property cleanups have to be balanced with the resources available to do the work and are scheduled accordingly."

The sweeps come after recent homeless camp cleanups at Minto-Brown Island Park, in downtown Salem and on private property near Wallace Marine Park.



The remnants of a camp of a homeless person who died earlier this year sits unattended in Wallace Marine Park in Salem, Oregon, on Friday, Aug. 9, 2019. CONNOR RADNOVICH / STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

A group in the homeless camp in Wallace Marine Park along Highway 22 had reportedly threatened to fight anyone who encroached on that camp, according to an early September email exchange between two City of Salem officials. The group's self-proclaimed leader was said to have encouraged people in the camp to vandalize the property and brandished a gun.

Beers Seydel referred questions about the possible threat to the Salem Police Department, which has said officers would help ODOT officials if they go into that area.

"We did go out to that area to conduct some follow-up, but we found nothing to substantiate the claim,"

Salem police Lt. Treven Upkes said Friday. "We will not be taking any special officer safety precautions if we assist ODOT."

Salem police usually stand by when they assist ODOT in case there's a disturbance, he said. They can arrest those who refuse to leave but can also help connect the homeless with services, he said.

More than 1,450 homeless individuals were believed to live in Marion and Polk counties, as of the latest available estimates.

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