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SALEM GOVERNMENT

Salem bans open camping and now seeks a place to host it

The Salem City Council approved a camping ban on Monday, but also set in motion a plan to quickly find a place for downtown campers to go. Meanwhile, health concerns may spur the break up of a large camp near The ARCHES Project downtown.

By Troy Brynelson - Salem Reporter

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Tents line the boulevard next to The ARCHES Project in downtown, where homeless residents have congregated in recent weeks. (Troy Brynerson/Salem Reporter)

Tents and other dwellings will soon have to disappear from sidewalks and boulevards after the Salem City Council on Monday night banned camping on public property.

But city officials aren't eighty-sixing campers altogether. The city is taking two weeks to designate a spot for them to camp.

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Councilors Tom Andersen and Vanessa Nordyke orchestrated the idea, separately pitching that city staff needed to find public property for campers to move when the ban goes into effect on Monday, Dec. 16.

As a result, city employees are expected to report to the council next Monday and what city-owned property could be used as an impromptu campground. Andersen said without such a space, it's unclear where the camping populace would go.

"These people aren't going to disappear because they can't camp in the city," he said.

Nordyke said the city needs to allow camping somewhere or it would endanger homeless residents' lives when temperatures dip below freezing. She also said it may be smarter financially.

"It's much cheaper in the long run to actually house someone than it is to run them through a perpetual cycle of interaction with law enforcement, being taken to jail, being taken to court," she said.

Details weren't provided Monday on how such a site would work in practice, how it would be organized and or who would run it.

Councilor Brad Nanke, who also made the point that the city needs to make sure it's not held liable if crimes occur at the site, appeared stunned by the moves.

"Tell me if I'm incorrect: We're going to identify locations - - this ordinance goes into effect in two weeks -- and it's the intention of councilors at next week's meeting to identify a location and say 'OK, you can go camp there now?'" he asked Mayor Chuck Bennett.

"I think there's a hope that there will be some place," Bennett replied.

"And we'll have private people ready to run such a facility or there will be a stampede -- I'm not happy with not knowing what it's going to be," Nanke said. "I know where my vote's going."

Councilors voted unanimously for the camping ban. Nanke was the sole opponent to the separate proposal to have staff track down city property.

Still, it's possible Salem's most visible camp could be dismantled before the camping ban goes into effect.

Dozens of tents currently encircle The ARCHES Project, on Northeast Commercial Street where Front Street intersects, and may violate city codes. Brady Rogers, who administers the city's code, told councilors the camp is both a health and a traffic risk that he may declare a public nuisance.

Under Salem law, a property deemed a public nuisance must be cleaned up either by the property owner, the occupants or the city itself.

Rogers said the camp qualified as a public nuisance a week ago and he expects circumstances worsened since.

"The tent camp has grown even larger. There's more of a dense, compact group of campers there even now. I don't know what the answer is other than I believe there could be evidence for a public nuisance there," he said.

Near the end of the meeting, Rogers responded to questions from Bennett by saying that he expects to visit the camp either Tuesday or Wednesday. He said if he does declare it a public nuisance, campers there may have a short time to pack and leave – "24, 48 hours, something like that," Rogers said.

Deputy Police Chief Skip Miller said police would be reaching out to the nonprofit's leaders about an impending clean-up of the camp.

Jimmy Jones, who heads the nonprofit, couldn't be reached for comment by press time.

Have a tip? Contact reporter Troy Brynelson at 503-575-9930, troy@salemreporter.com or @TroyWB.