

LOCAL NEWS

Citizens petition Lowell City Council for input on unhoused policies

Request input to city's decision and policy-making process

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LOWELL — Homelessness in Lowell is back on the [City Council's agenda](#) for its April 11 meeting — this time not as a council motion or departmental report, but as a [citizens' petition](#) that requests input to the city's decision and policy-making process on the issue.

The request was submitted by Joseph Boyle, of Lowell, on behalf of [Solidarity Lowell](#), a coalition of community members of Greater Lowell working towards social justice. Boyle is a member of the group's coordinating committee, and the citizens' petition requests changes to Lowell's unhoused persons liaison protocol, which is administered by the [Director of Homelessness Initiatives](#) Maura Fitzpatrick.

“My hope is that the requests in this document can form the basis for the city on how it moves forward on reforming and improving its relations with unhoused people and its homeless policies overall,” Boyle said by phone Monday.

The petition was signed by more than 100 people from the Greater Lowell area, including Andover, Billerica, Dracut, Chelmsford, Concord, Haverhill, Lawrence, Methuen, Pepperell and Tewksbury, as well as nonprofit advocacy and service agencies such as the [Merrimack Valley Project](#) of Lawrence, [Christ Church United of Lowell](#), St. John Episcopal Church, [Lowell Alliance](#), [Eliot Presbyterian Church](#), [Lowell Litter Krewe](#) and [Greater Andover Indivisible](#).

In previous council meetings, councilors have [suspended the rules](#) to move items like petitions up in the agenda so citizens can be heard in a timely fashion.

Boyle said he expects a good turnout, but is trying to organize speakers in a way that is respectful of the council’s time, so that “different people (aren’t) saying the same thing.”

The unhoused in Lowell have a [long and complicated history](#), and the issue has defied numerous attempts to address it in a [fundable way](#) that meets the needs of the community. It’s not an issue unique to the city; nationwide, homeless people are a growing demographic.

As part of its [winter protocol](#), the city launched an [encampment sweep](#) in January that unleashed a [firestorm of protest](#), and galvanized the various advocacy groups to mobilize in response.

The city’s winter protocol typically goes into effect during periods of extreme cold weather or heavy snowfall with the aim of ensuring a warm, safe bed for unhoused individuals.

But the execution of the Plain Street encampment, whose blue tarps could be seen from the Lowell Connector, was described as chaotic by Brad Buitenhuys, executive director of the Lowell Litter Krewe, a nonprofit which creates and supports volunteer cleanups in the city.

“(The city was) waking up people out of their tents and having them forcefully removed from their premise while they scrambled to collect their belongings,” Buitenhuis told people attending a Solidarity Lowell meeting in January. “Whatever they couldn’t scavenge and pack into a backpack within 10 minutes was thrown away.”

Out of that experience, which Boyle described as a “raid,” was a determination to put together a policy proposal to take to the City Council.

“We felt we could play a positive role by looking at actual policy proposals and best practices from other communities and recommendations from providers who are on the ground working with unhoused people,” he explained.

After several months of meetings and feedback, the [16-point petition](#) will be presented to the council for consideration as a working document on unhoused policy in Lowell.

Boyle says the aim of the petition is to help guide next steps in a [community-focused way](#), and not as a confrontation with the administration and council members.

“We’re not going [Tuesday] night to bash the heck out of the city,” Boyle said. “The city in its homeless policies is in many ways very generous — to provide housing and provide serious resources into homeless programs. And it demonstrates very good values on the part of the city. These raids seemed really inconsistent with those values and who the city wants to be.”

Individual comments in the petition speak to the encampment sweeps as a misguided policy approach.

Evan Barrington, of Chelmsford, wrote, “We need to work together to end the scourge of homelessness. Sweeps are not the answer,” while Lawrence resident Trevor Facui wrote that, “The unhoused are not criminals. It’s time for our policies to reflect this compassion.”

The city made a few more of the so-called sweeps before abandoning the effort until the [Lowell Encampment Health and Safety Protocol](#) document is vetted and approved by the council.

Boyle said he hoped the many voices that contributed to the petition would be heard and received by the council in the spirit of cooperation.

“Hopefully [Tuesday] night can be the beginning of productive discussions and conversations and collaboration,” he said.

Tags: **Andover**, **Billerica**, **Chelmsford**, **Concord**, **Dracut**, **Eliot Church**, **Haverhill**, **Homeless**, **Lawrence**, **Lowell Alliance**, **Lowell City Council**, **Methuen**, **Pepperell**, **Tewksbury**



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