

LOCAL NEWS

Homelessness, Cambodia on Lowell City Council agenda

Mayor seeks sister-city status for two Cambodian cities



A sea of Cambodian flags waves overhead as the Khmer New Year parade travels along School Street in Lowell on April 22, 2023. (Aleah Landry photo)



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LOWELL — The City Council takes up where it left off two weeks ago, with motions that revisit the city's response to the unhoused population, as well as two motions regarding possible sister-city relationships in Cambodia headlining its Tuesday night meeting at City Hall.

The meeting closes out a month that saw the delivery of several vehicles purchased through the city's \$79.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding, a citizens' petition regarding input to the city's homeless encampment protocol, the graduation of the second cohort of departmental heads in Middlesex Community College's diversity, inclusion and equity training and the imminent retirement of Interim Police Superintendent Barry Golner.

On top of all the ongoing day-to-day work, Chief Financial Officer Conor Baldwin is readying the city's fiscal 2024 budget for the council's review by May 23.

The two big items of the agenda come courtesy of Councilor Corey Robinson and Mayor Sokhary Chau.

Robinson's motion requests a detailed report on the feasibility of implementing a no overnight camping, sleeping or loitering ordinance in the business district, as well as in the Summer Street area, Gallagher Terminal and South Common Park area.

These locations encompass the Downtown Lowell and Back Central neighborhoods, which are home to several nonprofit homeless outreach organizations including the Lowell Transitional Living Center on Jackson Street.

The motion comes at the heels of the ending of two significant programs: the state-funded program that used emergency COVID-19 relief money from 2020 until March 30 this year, to expand both shelter and hotel beds for unhoused residents; and the end of the city's winter protocol, a cold-weather program that added at least 100 extra hotel beds to the city's available homeless resources during the winter months.

Currently, there are 12 agencies, churches and social service organizations in Lowell that provide unhoused individuals with winter outreach, shelter and services, but only one — LTLC — provides overnight shelter in the city.

In past practice, when the overnight shelter beds are full, unhoused individuals have established de facto outdoor housing, which range from one-off tents or lean-to shelters dotting South Common's tree line off Summer Street, to more permanent shelters in locations scattered throughout the city, more broadly known as [encampments](#).

Solidarity Lowell, which [presented a petition](#) to the council at its [April 11 meeting](#), requesting more input to the city's decision and policymaking process on the unhoused issue, said in a statement that the motion was "in direct opposition to our petition. City Councilor Corey Robinson has put forth a motion to make tenting in Lowell illegal in certain areas, which basically makes homelessness illegal in those areas. After we pointed out that making homelessness illegal in Massachusetts is illegal."

Another potentially hot-button part of the evening's proceedings are motions regarding possible sister-city agreements between Lowell and Phnom Penh and Battambang, Cambodia.

The first motion, co-sponsored by Chau and Councilor Paul Ratha Yem, asks the city manager to have the Law Department provide a report regarding the establishment of a sister-city agreement with Phnom Penh, referencing a memorandum of understanding signed on Jan. 14, 2015.

The second motion, by Chau, asks the city manager and/or the appropriate department to begin the process to establish a sister-city agreement with Battambang.

Chau is Lowell's first mayor of color and the first [Cambodian-American mayor](#) in the country.

The city enjoys sister-city relations with a number of locations around the world, including Limerick, Ireland; St. Die des Vosges, France; Nairobi, Kenya; Barclayville, Liberia; Lobito, Angola; Winneba, Ghana; Bamenda, Cameroon; Berdyansk, Ukraine; and Bryansk, Russia. Last April, Lowell also signed a sister-city agreement with [Kalamata, Greece](#), followed by a visit from local officials to the Greek city [in September](#).

The Cambodian community has strong and diverse opinions on Prime Minister Hun Sen, who assumed power nearly 40 years ago.

The motion comes just after a successful [Khmer New Year](#) that featured several city and neighborhood events and celebrations.

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The City Council meets in the second-floor chambers of City Hall, 375 Merrimack St. on Tuesdays at 6:30 p.m. To speak at a meeting, contact City Clerk Michael Geary before 4 p.m. the day of the meeting at 978-674-4161 or mgeary@lowellma.gov.

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