

In Lowell, debate over homeless encampment behind park

By [Sean Cotter](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 25, 2023, 8:12 p.m.



Protesters gathered outside of an unhoused encampment of more than 20 people behind the Centralville Dog Park in Lowell on Sunday. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

LOWELL — If there's a charter member of what the city calls the "Dog Park Camp" homeless encampment, it's Bobby Waylein.

He's resided in the woods behind the Centralville Dog Park next to the Merrimack River for the past 11 years.

"Why wouldn't I live here?" he said. "It's beautiful back here."

He said he fishes in the river — but doesn't eat his catch, he said with a dismissive wave to the murky waters, because "I'd come out with a third eye or something" — and generally just wants to be left alone.

He said he's tried to create a functional community back there. There's a code among the two-dozen residents of the tents, which are separated into singles and couples sections. There's a night watch schedule, he said, and rules: no fighting, no alcoholics who are currently drinking. Sometimes people pool money to get tents or the like for each other, he said.

He acknowledged there have been some "problems" — the city says weapons and drug issues — but he said they're trying to keep things calm.

"Being homeless, we kind of live outside of things," he said. "So we have to do that ourselves."



Bobby Waylein, who has been living in an unhoused encampment of more than 20 people behind the Centralville Dog Park in Lowell for a decade, walks through the camp holding his cat, Oreo. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Early Sunday morning, the residents of the encampment in the woods behind the dog park were girded for a sweep by authorities. They were joined by about 20 protesters holding signs against what they characterized as a coming sweep.

The sweep never materialized, but Lowell's city manager, Tom Golden, said the city does plan to clean out the area in the coming days as the region continues to grapple with how to handle such encampments.

Waylein, who said he's originally from South Boston, pointed out the hut he's created out of wooden pallets as he decried the upcoming "blitz."

"I'm literally going to stand on it," he said, "and I'm not going to go."

A flier dated Tuesday, June 20, said that the City of Lowell had deemed the area uninhabitable. The flier, which had contact information for a shelter, said the residents had until 8 a.m. Sunday to clear out their belongings, and anything left "WILL BE REMOVED AND DISPOSED OF."

But 8 a.m. came and went. The group of protesters from a couple of progressive groups in the area, were jumpy whenever a dump truck trundled by or a siren wailed. But as the morning passed, the demonstrators began to melt away under the hot early summer sun.

Golden said in a phone interview Sunday that the city's CO-OP team for homeless outreach has been meeting with the encampment's residents since June 19, and that they'll get everyone out in the next couple of days — without a police sweep.

"It's important to note we are cleaning this particular site because of the public health and public safety issues involving weapons and the trafficking of fentanyl," Golden said. But police investigations are ongoing, he said, so he can't comment further. "Our goal continues to be to get people the help they need and keep everyone safe."

If people don't leave, he said, "I'm confident our CO-OP team can help solve those issues."

The protesters, waving signs with messages including "Lowellians Over Luxury" and "Stop The Sweeps," said they didn't like how City Hall was handling issues of homelessness. In January, [according to the Lowell Sun](#), the city began an effort to get rid of homeless camps.

"They need to treat them like human beings," Joseph Boyle of Solidarity Lowell said at the encampment Sunday.

Amada Gregory, who said she plans to run for a city council seat, said people need to find common cause in the desires to get people out of encampments and hooked up with services.

"You need to see what's going on," she said. "You need to talk, you need to ask."

Multiple people compared the encampment to Boston's [troubled](#) Mass. and Cass area in the South End, where a large open-air drug market and homeless encampment fluctuates in size to sometimes hundreds, as opposed to the small, quieter place in Lowell.

And on Sunday morning, it was generally mellow, with a few people who don't live there coming by to chat with residents and sit on what appeared to be an old futon in the middle of the camp.

But a couple of people there described large river rats coming up and getting into food. In a tent nearby, a man held a lighter to the end of a thin glass pipe, like the kind that is typically used for smoking crack cocaine. A few needles littered the ground amid the assorted refuse of soda cans, tarps, and wood.



Caroline Zannoni uses a wheelchair to get to an unhoused encampment of more than 20 people behind the Centralville Dog Park in Lowell, where she has been living in a tent with her two sons. Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

Caroline Zannoni and her two adult sons, Mike and DJ, live in one tent there. On Sunday morning flies buzzed inside the pale green tent as the 65-year-old crawled in to change out of clothes wet from recent rain.

“It’s a good bunch of people and they don’t deserve this,” Zannoni said, referring to a possible sweep. “I’m very angry.”

Zannoni, who said she’s 11 months sober, cruised through a few personal stories: a month in a coma at Tufts Medical Center years ago, the snake bite on her arm in Maine, the recent hip replacement that put her in a wheelchair over the past few weeks.

She said if the authorities make her leave the dog-park encampment, she and her sons will move onto another spot. She's reluctant to go into a shelter, she said, because she and her sons likely wouldn't be able to be together, and "all my drinking buddies are in there."

Rather, she said, they'll go somewhere new outdoors to "another spot" and "not tell absolutely anyone about it."

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