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Lowell City Council pushes homeless camping ban

Ordinance to model Boston's recently passed law

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PUBLISHED: November 17, 2023 at 7:08 AM EST

LOWELL — The issue of homelessness in the city of Lowell roared back to the forefront of the City Council's [Tuesday night agenda](#) with two motions regarding camping by unhoused individuals on public property.

Councilors Corey Robinson, Kim Scott and Danny Rourke submitted a motion requesting that City Manager Tom Golden have the proper department consider adopting an ordinance relating to unlawful camping on public property similar to the city of Boston.

A second motion by Robinson invited all key stakeholders — including unhoused residents — to be part of that ordinance discussion, even as the sponsoring councilors spoke emphatically that the ordinance was moving forward with or without those voices.

“We have to make a statement that it is illegal to do so,” Rourke said during his remarks from the floor. “You can’t be camping on public property. These are public safety hazard and serious health issues.”

In October, the Boston City Council passed, by a vote of 9-3, an ordinance that bans individuals from setting up tents and tarps on public property. The [ordinance](#) stipulates that police would have the authority to enforce the camping ban on the condition that individuals are offered shelter and transportation to services, as well as storage for personal belongings. The city of Lowell does not offer storage for homeless residents' belongings.

Resident Marissa Dupont spoke against the camping ban, saying that the council's actions weren't "rational" and pointed out the city's local shelter, the Lowell Transitional Living Center, was already at capacity.

"It appears many of you think that if you move the unhoused people around enough that they'll just decide to move somewhere else," she said. "We might have more beds than other cities, but it is far from enough. Motions like this are a slippery slope to making homelessness illegal, which is illegal."

Since last January, the city has swept at least four high-profile homeless encampments: [Plain Street](#), which was located off the Lowell Connector at the Plain Street exit, in January; an encampment behind the [Dog Park in Centralville](#) in June; [South Common Park](#) in July; and the [Kyan Street](#) camp in September. Additionally, smaller, one-off camping sites have been cleared, including one located by the Swamp Locks Pedestrian Bridge over the [Lower Pawtucket Canal](#).

Those putative actions, which have displaced upwards to 100 people, seemingly have not decreased the numbers of nor dissuaded homeless people from calling Lowell home.

In July, before the South Common, Kyan and Swamp Locks sweeps, the city's [Homeless Initiatives tracker](#) listed a total of 238 individual adult homeless, of whom 124 were unsheltered. By September, those numbers had jumped to 291, with 165 unsheltered, representing a 41-person increase.

Without specifically tying the Kyan sweep to the increased presence of unhoused people, Councilor Paul Ratha Yem reported that, "If you go to Cambodia Town right now, the homeless population has really increased dramatically to the point that the businesses are suffering."

Although many communities have unhoused people, not all communities provide services for their unhoused. Instead, the towns of Amesbury, Andover, Billerica, Boxford, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Georgetown, Groveland, Haverhill, Lawrence, Merrimack, Methuen, Newbury, Newburyport, North Andover, Rowley, Salisbury, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro, West Newbury, Westford and Wilmington have entered into an agreement with Lowell, to provide those services through places like LTLC on Middlesex Street.

Robinson said Lowell is bearing more than its fair share of the homeless crisis and suggested that the increase in numbers is due to “influxes from surrounding communities.”

“People are getting dropped off because we are a social-service mecca,” he said. Robinson also stated that, “This isn’t just local residents that we’re dealing with.”

Verifying that claim is difficult because the city’s website does not offer population demographics broken down by age, gender, race or home community, so it is not known how many of the 291 people are Lowell residents versus from any one of the compact towns or other places.

Another concern is enforcement of the proposed ordinance, which needs to be drafted by the Law Department and be brought back to the council for a vote. The Lowell Police Department is down almost 40 officers, and its [field operations](#) are still being impacted by [April’s cyberattack](#).

The issue as to whether the city has enough beds to comply with a Boston-style ordinance is also not clear. During the Dog Park sweep, because the LTLC was at capacity, transportation was offered to beds in Worcester, which were declined by the displaced residents. They reported that they would relocate to other public spots throughout the city.

Sam Habib spoke to a reporter after the South Common sweep, describing his experience with the shelter system and service providers in Lowell. He said he has a day-labor job with a waste-hauling company, but lost his apartment when the owner sold the property. He stayed at the shelter during the city’s winter protocol, but has been out on the streets since the program ended in March, reducing the number of available beds by more than 30.

“When the weather started getting nice, they pushed everybody out onto the street,” he said. “I was one of the people pushed out. I’m not a drug user, I don’t have HIV. You just have to find a spot and go under a bridge.”

He said that his job is in Lowell, and he can’t take shelter out of town. Another homeless man, who was evicted from the Kyan encampment, said his mother lives in low-income housing in Lowell, and while he can’t stay overnight with her, he drops in for weekly visits. He also said he did not accept the offer for shelter out of town.

The two motions were bundled and passed unanimously. Mayor Sokhary Chau was absent.

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“You cannot disappear them,” Dupont said. “They live here whether you want to think that or not.”

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