

LOCAL NEWS

Lowell 'sweeps' homeless camp by Merrimack River

Number of people 'sleeping rough' has doubled since 2016, despite services, sweeps and policing



By **MELANIE GILBERT** | mgilbert@lowellsun.com

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LOWELL — On Tuesday, the city of Lowell authorized the clearing of the illegal homeless encampment at the [Sheehy Park extension](#). These so-called “sweeps” are a last-ditch strategy that the administration of City Manager Tom Golden and the City Council have frequently deployed both out of concerns for public health and safety, as well as a desperate attempt to try and address the growing social crisis.

The city enlisted the help of Lowell’s state delegation to remove at least a dozen people and their belongings from what is state-owned, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority railroad property along the Merrimack River off Pawtucket Street.

“We appreciate the partnership with MBTA to address this [homeless encampment](#), which has existed for some time,” state Rep. Rodney Elliott said by email on Tuesday. “Addressing the challenges faced by the homeless encampment near the Vurgaropulos Bridge is a pressing issue for our community.”

The camp was cleared by contractors working for Keolis Commuter Services, which operates and maintains the MBTA commuter rail system. Workers from Republic Services, an environmental and waste-removal company, used a backhoe, a front loader and several smaller skid steer loaders to clear and groom the site. Two large dumpsters were filled with tents, tarps and other camp detritus.

Although they declined to speak with the press, two Keolis employees confirmed that they were on site to monitor the work. They were joined by a half-dozen Lowell police officers and outreach workers with the Lowell Community Health Center’s [Kraft Care in Reach mobile van](#).

Within hours, the sprawling camp that once occupied the area between Lowell’s Highlands and Acre neighborhoods was gone.

Outreach workers said that the city had been notifying the camp residents of the impending sweep for several weeks, and “Notice to Vacate” signs were still posted to trees at various camp entrances.

“The city of Lowell has deemed this site uninhabitable,” declared the laminated notice. “All persons are directed to vacate this site immediately and remove all belongings. Any property left at this site will be removed and disposed of ... To arrange shelter please call 978-458-9888 or visit [Lowell Transitional Living Center](#), 205 Middlesex St.”

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development defines individuals as homeless if they lack a “fixed, regular and adequate nighttime address.” But even homeless people with an emergency bed at night become unsheltered during the day when LTLC asks its clients to leave the premises.

No homeless people were present during Tuesday’s sweep, and outreach workers said most had moved offsite before the camp-clearing action. It was not clear where they had moved to, but Managing Director Isaiah Stephens said limited space was available at the LTLC on Merrimack Street in Downtown Lowell.

The largest shelter north of Boston offers 60 overnight dorm beds for chronically homeless individuals. When there is not space in the dorm, the lobby doubles as an emergency bed program with set-up cots making room for about 20 people.

“The City of Lowell did inform LTLC of the recent encampment clearings and invited the shelter to participate in proactive outreach, offering shelter placements and support services to those impacted,” Stephens said by email Tuesday. “As of today, the LTLC has five available beds designated for females and five available beds for males.”

Advocates with LLAMA, which stands for Lifting Lowellians: Assistance and Mutual Aid, and Solidarity Lowell protested the sweep. LLAMA works to match people who offer resources with those who need it, while Solidarity Lowell works toward social justice on a range of issues.

LLAMA members held signs for passing cars at the corner of Broadway and Pawtucket streets. One said “Justice for the unhoused. Housing not sweeps.”

Members with Solidarity Lowell were staged at one of the camp entrances. They said that the sweeps were “performative” and would do more to hurt the displaced people than help solve the homeless crisis.

“This is yet another sweep in the history of sweeps that are basically just forcing the homeless folks here to do musical chairs around the city,” Marissa Dupont, of Solidarity Lowell, said. “They’re just going to go from camp to camp to camp depending on which one is being swept at which time.”

In the past few years, the city has cleared communal encampments from public spaces like [Plain Street](#), the so-called [Dog Park](#), [South Common](#) and [Kyan Street](#), along with [smaller, one-off type locations](#).

Advocates say displacing people from squalid but stable shelter simply relocates the problem to other and potentially more public spaces. That anecdotal truth seemed to play out last summer as [South Common Park](#) was overrun with numerous homeless encampments.

“They’re sweeping this camp, which is on the outskirts of downtown, and these folks are going to end up going downtown, so then the [small businesses](#) are going to complain,” Dupont said. “They’re going to end up in South Common again.”

Camp sweeps have taken place in Lowell [for decades](#), and have done little to change the trajectory of the homeless crisis or size of the population. The number of homeless people sleeping rough in Lowell doubled from 25 since [2016](#).

This year's [point-in-time count](#) recorded 250 homeless people in Lowell — 50 were unsheltered and living outdoors at places like Sheehy Park.

Last fall, after spending roughly \$10 million on supports and services for Lowell's homeless population over the past several years, the City Council tacked hard [toward enforcement](#) and passed an [ordinance to ban](#) sleeping, tenting or camping in public spaces in the city of Lowell.

The ordinance has been used sparingly, but that may change with the end of winter protocol, a four-month period between November and March that expanded the number of hotel and emergency shelter beds.

Many homeless people may end up migrating back toward the park, which is also the track and field location for the STEM Academy located in a corner of the park on Highland Street, as well as a 22-acre public [green space](#).

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“We must ensure those without homes are treated with dignity and respect while prioritizing public safety,” Elliott said. “I commend the Lowell co-op team for their outreach efforts and stand ready to collaborate with city officials to expedite a compassionate resolution. Together, we will work towards a solution that not only cleans the area but provides meaningful support for those in need.”

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