

Craig, Sondra

From: Elsen, Nikki
Sent: Thursday, June 8, 2023 8:55 AM
To: Craig, Sondra
Subject: FW: Thoughts on 23-0673

From: Jess Thill <thill.jess@gmail.com>
Sent: Thursday, June 8, 2023 8:24 AM
To: ZZ Council Members <zzcouncilmembers@cityoflacrosse.org>
Subject: Thoughts on 23-0673

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Members of the Common Council,

I watched the Council Planning meeting on 6/6 virtually – I'll take a moment here to say that the new A/V equipment is pretty great for those of us who cannot easily attend in person – as our community's response to homelessness is an issue of deep personal interest to me. I was relieved that the focus of the session was on helping members of the public and our elected bodies learn more about the effectiveness of humane, successful Housing First policies. Rather than providing another open mic for people without lived experience of homelessness to share their unfiltered views about the moral failings of our city's poorest and most vulnerable residents, the session's focus was on helping people overcome their objections to the Housing First approach. This was encouraging.

I was also encouraged to hear that representatives of the city and county intend to work more closely together to solve the complex and pervasive problems of poverty and homelessness in La Crosse. On the other hand, this kind of long term solution does nothing to assist people without homes now. Regardless of where they were born, when they moved to La Crosse, or what circumstances led to their homelessness, they're here *now*. They need a safe place to exist *now*.

That's why I am so dismayed to see item 23-0673 slated for review by the Judiciary and Administration committee at the 6/8 special meeting. Less than 48 hours after our city's Homelessness Coordinator made a compelling case for the necessity of compassionate, data-driven decision making, our Council president has introduced an agenda item outlawing sleeping in parks. Even worse, there has been very little time for the public to learn about this item in order to register public opinion on it before its consideration, due to it being short-circuited. Although the intention behind this may come from a place of wanting to help, the effect of this legislation is criminalizing homelessness in a community that has failed to provide an adequate number of reasonable alternatives.

I recognize the precarious position that city staff and council members are in, balancing the often loud objections of city residents and business owners, as well as people from outside the city, whose usual use of the parks has been disrupted against the needs of people who aren't able to advocate strongly for themselves and who often aren't behaving in ways that make sense to those of us without their struggles. However, I think that most of you would agree that the people with the most to lose in this situation are our city's homeless, who risk their lives and the loss of their only possessions daily... and those are the people I hope you will keep in mind as you consider your vote on this proposed ordinance. Our public spaces can and should be places of rest and refuge.

Prohibiting anyone from camping in a public park is an inadequate response to this public health and housing crisis, and it seems especially short-sighted and cruel when we cannot point people to other options. The enforcement mechanism of this ordinance is also unclear to me as it seems to be written in an overly broad way that would make bringing a blanket, setting up a hammock, or taking a snooze an offense. It is also unclear what happens if people do not (or cannot) vacate the park within an hour of being asked to leave. Will they be issued citations and fines? Arrested and jailed? At the very least, a decision with such an outsized impact on residents deserves to go through the usual council cycle to allow time for adequate discussion and research about the effects of ordinances like these on other communities and their members, as well as any procedural questions staff may raise with more time.

Thank you for your service and for the seriousness with which you all deliberate and make decisions. I look forward to seeing how you proceed.

Jessica Thill
1417 Mississippi Street
608-792-5920