

Craig, Sondra

From: Jon Ellefson <broker.jon@icloud.com>
Sent: Tuesday, May 21, 2024 11:55 AM
To: ZZ Council Members
Cc: Neva Von Haden
Subject: Encampment in Flooded Marsh
Attachments: Updated 5-21-2024 Camping Log.docx

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Hello all. My name is Jon Ellefson and I am a property tax paying resident of The Landings Condominium and also the current VP for the condominium's association located at 14 Copeland Ave. We have 44 privately owned units in our building with 22 of them facing the beautiful river and the marsh. Its is one of the main reasons many of us choose to live here. Collectively, we pay the city well over \$200,000 in property taxes for privilege. But with the homeless now living in our backyard, some are questioning why? Why is this allowed , and why is this ok? There has not been one resident of this building that has not been negatively affected by what has been allowed to happen with the homelessness in the marsh. Below is real log illustrating just some of the things we have had to deal with since the encampment has been allowed. This list is not all inclusive and doesn't address every concern. We will continue to add to the list, daily, and update you before the Board of Public works meets in June. I respectfully ask that you review the list below, and also urge you to take whatever short term and long term action warranted to address this growing problem. Time is of the essence and the longer it goes unaddressed, the larger the problem will become. Thank you for all that you do, and thank you for taking the time to review this memo and list

Jon E Ellefson
VP The Landings Condominium Assn
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Sent from my iPhone

REMEMBER WHEN?...

MARCH 22, 2024

La Crosse mayor issues statement on homeless camp clean-up efforts

City of La Crosse (WEAU)

By Heather Knox

Mayor Reynolds issued a news release today about cleaning up after “long-term overnight camping” along the Black River shoreline.

According to the release, the accumulation of large amounts of litter, including potentially hazardous waste, created an environmental hazard, spring flooding threats and other public health and safety hazards that have been associated with long-term encampments.

“Roughly 130 tons of abandoned items were removed from the sites over two days this week. The total of collected refuse and abandoned belongings from the same sites have totaled more than 180 tons since the beginning of the year,” the release said.

According to the mayor, measures were taken to attempt to reduce the impact of this clean-up on the homeless community. Weekly notices to vacate were posted starting in mid-February. City staff, NROs, and agencies worked to connect those impacted with needed services and resources, such as storage of belongings and other places to go.

4/11/2024

On Thursday afternoon, April 11th, around 2:45pm I became aware of a man staggering around on the bike trail below my balcony at The Landings Condos who was clearly impaired and laughing and talking loudly (to himself I believe). I watched (and recorded) from my balcony. He was shirtless, Asian, maybe 30-40-ish, slim build, wearing drooping black pants with white undies folded over the top. He was scraping at the bark of a small tree by the La Crosse River below my balcony with what appeared to be a stick or pole about 24" long as he carried on in a rant. He was making gouges in the bark of the tree with the stick (which are still visible). He walked up the sidewalk toward our building at the back under my balcony and attempted to enter the door as he laughed and ranted "they locked the door". He picked up a

couple of fist sized rocks from the landscaping and wandered back to the trail. An attempted break-in?

He walked north toward Festival Foods on the path and sat on the river bank for a bit, put his shirt on and hung a black and blue backpack in the tree by the deck/bench on the river on the north side of the building by our north parking lot. At this point I called 911 and they said they would send an officer to investigate. The man then took something out of the backpack leaving it hanging in the tree and removed his black shirt and stuck it under one of the big boulders along the trail, and continued to pace back and forth along the path. (The backpack would remain hanging there into the evening.)

As the man came closer, I could see that he was wielding nunchucks (apparently they had been stuck together and that's what I thought was a pole). He walked back and forth several times posing and swinging the nunchucks, passing along the bike path, still shirtless, and then I guess he realized he had left his shirt under the rock and came back to collect it. He put it on and continued southwest along the bike path where he disappeared around our building in the direction of Riverside park. I continued watching to see if he would come back for the backpack, but he did not under my watch. I called the police back at about 3:30 pm that afternoon as I had not seen an officer, and was told that an officer had come to investigate and walked the bike path but could find no one. Not sure what time that happened because I didn't see anyone in uniform on the bike path - or anyone else for that matter. I told the dispatcher that I had videos and photos on my phone, but heard no follow-up. I suspect that the officers went to the wrong part of the trail or came by after the man had long disappeared.

Janet Koppelman (#205)

Week of 4/14/2024

Spoke with Nick Smaby, Recycling Coordinator. Nick was about to check the trash on the trail (behind River Architects building) when I saw and talked to him. We walked part of the Veteran's trail. He was disgusted by the trash, etc. He suggested I call the DNR about the campers and trash. Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

4/16/2024

Jim Fox (#313) walked the trail under the Copeland Ave. bridge and found an unconscious male whose pants were down to his thighs, backside exposed. Police were called.

4/17/2024

Spoke with Matt (the warden). Matt said the marsh is city property, and it's their responsibility. Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

4/18/2024

About 6:30 PM. Found 2 syringes (in wrappers – appeared to be unused) at the intersection of Copeland Ave and our trail by the flashing lights. Non-emergency police phone number called. Syringes were gone an hour later. Diane Silva (#112) and Dawn Rauschnot (#106)

4/21/2024

Fire in marsh. Called 911 to report fire. Nancy and Jerry Rank (#214)

4/22/2024

Walked the Veteran's Trail and was asked by homeless guy for money.
Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

4/22/2024

9:30AM. Walking toward The Landings from Copeland Ave on the sidewalk behind Borton Construction/Wipfli building. Saw a policeman by the edge of the river, holding something - a gun he had been told about in the bank, by a woman walking her dogs. Identified it as a BB gun but it looked like a "real" gun. It was still clean. Officer removed it.
Gretchen Skoloda (#213) and Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

4/23/2024

1:10PM. I heard shouting and went to the patio. A woman near the green tent with the yellow flags was screaming, "Get out!" and "F-Off!". The man said, "I didn't steal your stuff!". The screaming continued a few more minutes. Fran Rybarik (#211)

4/23/2024

Jim Fox (#313) found about 30 used drug needles along Veteran's trail. He called Fire Dept Chief, who sent 3 firefighters, who collected the needles.

4/23/2024

1:10PM. Called the non-emergency Police number to report an altercation in the camp across the river from The Landings. Both male and female voices in loud, profane shouting.
Dave Skoloda (#213)

4/23/2024

Diane Silva (#112) saw an old red vinyl bleacher chair on the side of the (the Jim Asfoor) trail to Menards.

4/24/2024

Campfire in the marsh, about 8:15PM. Called 911. Fire department and police responded.
Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

4/26/2026

3:30PM. Delivered needles to Fire House #2. I found them when a Festival bag I was cleaning up with next to the Jim Asfoor Trail fell apart and scattered needles. I informed the fireman who accepted them of another site, next to the trail, which I also found littered with needles. He said they would pick them up.

Dave Skoloda (#213)

4/27/2024

3PM. Dog barking across the river from our unit. Jennifer Lupes (#305)

4/28/2024

7AM. Dog roaming loose across the river from our unit. Appears to be a large, white spaniel-type. It is NESTING SEASON in the marsh. Jennifer and Dave Lupes (#305)

4/29/2024

6:20AM. I was solicited for a sexual act when walking on the Veterans Trail, about 250 yards in from Lang Drive. The man was a white male, late 30s to early 40s, unshaven, wearing a camo jacket, watch cap and dark pants. Dave Lupes (#305)

5/1/2024

5:30AM. Yelling and screaming vulgar language (from camp across river). Finally at 5:50AM I called city police. I talked to officer later and he said it was a domestic. No arrests.

Jim Fox. (#313)

5/1/2024

6:55PM. Called 911. Campfire in marsh. Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/3/2024

1:15 PM. My daughter and I walked the Vietnam Veterans Trail from Lang Drive to Copeland Avenue. We saw trash strewn right next to the trail and down into the marsh, and when we reached the area behind the River Architects building, a group of seven people, mostly men, was gathered around the picnic table. As we passed them, making sure not to make eye contact, two of the men turned to us and screamed out. We don't know if they were on drugs, mentally ill, or just trying to scare us. They glared at us, but didn't get in our way. Once again, we have decided not to walk on that trail. - Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/3/2024

9:30-9:50. Screaming in the marsh. Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/3/2024 (?)

Called 911. Fire across river from the Borton/Wipfli building. Nancy Rank

5/5/2024

11:15. I called the non-emergency police number to report a verbal altercation across the river, likely involving the green tent across from our unit, although with the leaf out conditions, I can't be sure about that. Police responded very quickly, asking for location clarification. The shouting, with the usual F*** You language, included a woman's scream and someone shouting, "Don't push me!" I decided it was getting physical enough to warrant the call.

Dave Skoloda (#213)

5/9/2024

12:45. Gunshot in marsh. Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/11/2024

8:20PM. Campfire in marsh, across from community room deck. Called 911. They told me to call the non-emergency number in the future. Fire Department responded.

Diane Silva (#112)

5/11/2024

8:20PM. I also saw that campfire and called 911. Dispatcher said the Fire Department was on the way. She did NOT tell me to dial the non-emergency number in the future. Two firefighters

stood on our side of the river (The Landings side). They somehow had communicated with the camper across the river, and he scooped river water into a container and doused his campfire.

Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/12/2024

(Mother's Day) My friend and I were out on my deck when there was loud profane shouting that continued for about 10 minutes off and on, complete with the usual "F-bombs" drifting over the river. I did not notify authorities as I assumed others heard it as well. Perhaps not.

Janet Koppelman (#205)

5/12/2024

4:15PM. Campfire in marsh in front of blue tent 3/4 along the marsh trail, toward Monitor Street. The fire was out when I looked again about 5 minutes later.

Al Gedicks (#115)

5/12/2024

Screaming in the marsh, across the river. Many F*** Yous. Occurred intermittently between 9:30PM and midnight. Called 911. Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/13/2024

Spoke with DNR about boat on river (behind The Landings) at midnight, with no running lights. Same boat is here often, at various times, day and night. Also regularly at midnight, 2:00AM, and 4:00AM. Provided pictures of the boat taken earlier in day, as well as location where the boat is stored on the Black River. Kathy and Tom Zieja (#311)

5/14/2024

I have also seen (and HEARD) the boat Kathy and Tom Zieja mentioned in the previous entry. Only LATE at night. No running lights. Coming and going, repeatedly.

Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/15/2024

Early AM. Beginning at 2:20AM, boat traffic going up river, then later returning. This occurred three times before 7:00AM. Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/15/2024

Called police when profanity and screaming continued for prolonged episode at 2:30PM.
Jim Fox (#313)

5/15/2024

2:40 PM. Police observed pulling into Wipfli parking lot. They went to bike trail for approximately 2 minutes, then sat in squad car for 5 minutes and exited behind Festival.
Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/15/2024

I called La Crosse police at 5:40PM, after a long screaming and profane exchange across the river, and I heard what sounded like a gunshot. Mary Nelson (#313)

5/15/2024

6:30PM. North end of the Jim Asfoor Trail (by Monitor St). Guy on trail with bike made an "exchange" with a man coming up from a camp - cash and packets.
Chris and Denny Hallemeier (#207)

5/15/2024

I exited the single door on the north end of our building at about 7:10PM (still light out), to go to Festival. JUST outside the door, RIGHT in front of me, was a seedy-looking man, standing, straddled, over a red small-wheeled bike. I darted quickly past and to the corner, glancing over my shoulder, keeping track of where he was. He moved, with his bike, to just behind our building's chillers, on the river side. I watched him take something out of his pocket and look at it. I crossed over and stood to watch in front of Festival. A big guy pulled a van into an Altra parking space and got out. The guy on his bike rode over and dropped his bike on the grass in front of the big guy's van, and the two guys crossed over the Landing's grassy area next to our chillers, toward the river. Less than a minute later, they came back and went their separate ways. This appeared to be a drug deal. Those are increasing, in the marsh behind us, on surrounding trails, and around The Landings. The screaming and fighting across from us, day and night, is also increasing. Neva Von Haden (#203)

5/15/2024

9:56PM. (Sent to Landing residents)

The nightly boater (with no running lights) cruised by 10 minutes ago, and is returning back through as I began to type this. He did this at least three times last night (5/14/2024), in the hours from midnight on. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth...

These are text messages to and from our 3rd District Council Member Barb Janssen today:

Neva: Hi Barb, this is Neva Von Haden from The Landings. Is camping across the river/behind our building going to be on the June 3 agenda? Will we be allowed to speak? Things are getting increasingly rough over here...

Barb Janssen: I expect it to be on the agenda. Be sure to call in to 911, police or fire dept, etc. any situations to document issues. Mayor chooses if there will be public comment at that mtg. Anyone can submit written statements.

Neva: We have been calling. A drug deal was happening IMMEDIATELY outside of our building's north door last night. I was startled at how close he was when I exited, on my way to Festival. About 7PM. It was still light outside. The two guys were gone before police could have arrived. That's how quickly they did their business. One of our residents heard a gunshot behind our building/across the river last week. There is fighting and screaming going on at all hours over there. A boat runs back and forth past our building several times a night, in the dark, with its running lights off. It is all getting increasingly dangerous.

Barb Janssen: I am sorry you are still dealing with this. Thanks for reporting.

Neva: It's maddening as property owners - paying high taxes and being afraid to walk out of our building. If anyone in any neighborhood called to report disturbances like these, people would be arrested. Please let us know what else we can do to ensure that this is on the agenda, Barb.

Barb Janssen: I will. I continue exploring options.

5/16/2024

12:21PM. Called 911 about a disturbance across the river. Dispatch was able to hear the disturbance in the background (on the phone). Yelling and profanities. Male and female voices. No known response from law enforcement. Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/16/2024

3:05PM. Called 911 again about domestic disturbance directly across river from our rain garden. Male and female arguing, yelling, profanities. Female referred to male as “putting hands on me” and “pulling hair”. No known response from law enforcement. Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/16/2024

Called 911. Heard man and woman screaming at each other. Woman screamed “Get off me!”
Mary Kay Kavanaugh (#215)

5/17/2024

Spoke with an officer who was on patrol. Discussed our situation, as well as the late-night boat with no running lights. She said we should continue to call. She also provided the names of Lt. Smith or Sgt. Oates, who can be contacted through non-emergency 608-782-7575. She also said someone was arrested regarding shooting a gun in the marsh. Additionally, she said the police are regularly patrolling the bike trail and walk in from the architectural building.
Kathy Zieja (#311)

5/17/2024

Dear Mayor Reynolds and members of the Public Works Committee:

We are writing regarding your June decision about whether or not to ban camping in the marshland along the Veterans’ Trail between Copeland Avenue and the pedestrian bridge. We urge you to actually visit the encampment before you make a decision.

We wrote before your April meeting and had two concerns: fire and garbage. We also attended that meeting. Our first concern has been allayed as the fire department has responded numerous times to reports of open fires. Chuck Lee of “Friends of the Marsh” assured us after the April meeting that fires are, in fact, good for the ecology of the marsh. Of course, this leaves the possibility of a tragic human toll if a fire rages out of control in the hot summer days to come.

The issue of garbage remains. Chuck assured us that the Friends of the Marsh attends to this, but we walked the Veterans-Asfor trail this past Wednesday after time away. The garbage situation seems to be worse, even though the Friends of the Marsh advertised a clean-up. A greater concern now is the raw sewage that is being dumped into the river. We would ask you on your visit to assess how human excrement is actually being handled and what the consequences may be to both human and ecological health. Chuck assured us that city workers are visiting the

encampments twice a week, so they could presumably add more data to your own onsite assessment.

After the April meeting, we felt that the city had the situation in hand and that patience was warranted. We have no expertise but felt that this small area could handle the six encampments we had counted. We no longer believe this. Since no regulation seems possible, this situation will not remain stable and can only worsen. At the end of April, we counted 19 camp sites. It is now hard to count because of the greenery, but rumors abound of new carloads of people, with tents, being dropped off into this small area. Again, your own count is needed.

Meanwhile there are definite signs that the city may now be sponsoring a haven for drug users.

- On our May 15 evening walk we saw a jolly man on a bicycle pulling a cart. He met a young man who popped out from the north encampment for some kind of an “exchange”. Our neighbors are witnessing a growing number of such incidents. They are happening close to our home, and the people involved are increasingly bold and menacing. Calls to the police are ineffective since the individuals are long gone before anyone arrives. With the city’s present reactive stance, it seems it will take a tragic assault to prompt action.
- A boat with a flashlight prowls the water in the midnight hours.
- The number of loud arguments and screams from the encampment, day and night, is definitely increasing.
- On a pleasant spring night, we used to see families and bikers and couples using the trail. On this last walk it was eerily empty except for our jolly biker.
- Gunshots have been reported several times.

These cumulative observations point to a situation that is no longer adequately described by the word “homeless.” We believe that the city’s inaction is effectively sponsoring an environment of growing violence and drug use and, with this, an increasing probability of victimization. It is not hard to imagine what summer heat will bring in terms of human misery.

What to do? Waiting five years for “Pathways Home” to be in place is not an answer. Environmental degradation will continue in this unregulated patch of land as the population increases and tragedy (assault or, God forbid, death) is highly likely. We realize that there is no single answer but we get impatient when inaction is excused by saying that Houska Park or the Econo Lodge did not work. Every attempt to address this complex situation will need to build on failures as well as successes: why didn’t those situations work? Could they be reimaged in another try? We personally believe that the answer does not lie in herding two hundred plus people into one place: confining the most vulnerable population with predators is just not a good idea. Regarding the campers across the way, perhaps the twenty households could be offered city-funded camping facilities in four campgrounds around the county where humane living

conditions would be possible. The yellow van could bring needed supplies to those sites. If campers reject such an offer, we don't understand why our precious public spaces should be sacrificed for the benefit of people whose personal preferences for rough camping are destructive to the environment and to community safety and well-being.

Please don't callously dismiss our concerns about the degradation of our neighborhood. Conditions are worsening in observable ways. Prohibiting camping in the marsh on June 3 will press solutions regarding campers that can be addressed thoughtfully now rather than in the middle of a tragedy.

We do thank you for all of your work on behalf of us all. Public service is a difficult challenge in these times and we appreciate the time and effort you invest in making La Crosse a good place to live for all of us.

Sincerely,
Chris and Denny Hallemeier
14 Copeland Avenue #207

5/18/2024

Received a call back from the DNR about complaint regarding the boat with no running lights, late at night. DNR made contact with the suspect, along with the Fish and Wildlife officer and Campbell Police Department. Suspect was arrested on an outstanding warrant from Marathon County. DNR is not sure if suspect has posted bond. Suspect was given warning about operating boat at night with no navigation lights.

New issue: There is another new tent across from 311. Kathy Zieja (#311)

To: Mayor Reynolds and other city and county officials
From: Dave and Gretchen Skoloda, 14 Copeland Ave. #213, La Crosse
May 19, 2024 8:54 PM

Re: Camping in the Floodway

The City of La Crosse is allowing camping in the floodway in the lands between the Asfoor and Veterans Trails from the Copeland Bridge to Monitor. According to the Floodplain Zoning Map, those lands, some city-owned and some privately owned, are in the floodway. Camping is not

listed as a permitted use of land in the floodway for good reason: to avoid the flooding that happens as it did a few years ago when the floodway area in question was a lake.

Today's NWS weather forecast cites risks of heavy rain in the days just ahead. We and others strongly urge the city to take action promptly to avoid the need to rescue campers from a severe rainstorm and flooding; one-inch per hour rains were seen as possible. Public safety officials have indicated their concern for such an event happening.

There is a further prohibition in the zoning code on uses "not in harmony with or detrimental to uses permitted in the adjoining districts." The Landings neighborhood of 44 homes is in the district that abuts the floodway. Landings residents have repeatedly objected to the camping citing multiple reasons why it is detrimental. There are further prohibitions on "habitable structures" and the presence of materials that are buoyant, flammable, explosive, injurious to property, water quality, or human, animal, plant, fish or other aquatic life.

As for the Public Works meeting scheduled in June to reconsider banning camping in some marsh properties, it may not be needed since the camping in question is already banned under the city's floodplain zoning.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this urgent matter.

Dave and Gretchen Skoloda

5/20/2024

Dear Mayor Reynolds and Board of Public Works,

My name is Kathy Zieja. My husband and I live at the Landings Condo's at 14 Copeland Ave., La Crosse, Wi. facing the La Crosse River. We have resided here since 2007. Our building has 44 units with 22 facing the La Crosse River. We moved to the Landings due to the beauty of the river and the surrounding marsh. We are amazed at the diversity of animals, birds and beautiful nature in close proximity to downtown La Crosse. We love the bike trail that allows our community to enjoy this great area. This has been a great place to live but there has been a significant change within the last year.

We are now experiencing daily, chronic disturbances from the homeless encampments that are inhabiting the marsh and floodway along the river and bike trail. The time frame of this change coincides with the clearing of the encampments from the Black River near Riverside Park. They have moved to the “backyard” of our homeowners. Since the change occurred, we experience disturbances daily including gun shots, screaming, hollering, and profanities. There are domestic disturbances with physical altercations among the “campers”. We have called the police due to the altercations in hopes that no one will be injured. We also are concerned for our own safety. We are awakened at all hours of the night along with hearing this throughout the day. Drug deals are being observed near the bike trail. Many needles have been found for which the fire department has been contacted. Campfires have been burning during burn bans and the fire department has been called. Our vehicle has been broken into with damage to two windows along with theft of personal belongings. A resident has been sexually propositioned while walking the trail. On a regular basis, a 14 foot Alumacraft had been traveling up and down the river several times per day. Frequently this was late at night, beginning midnight with multiple trips per night, waking us up. We have contacted the DNR as the boat has no running lights. We were advised the boat owner was arrested on an outstanding warrant.

This area is no place for the encampments with no potable water or toilet facilities. The trash piling up is significant. The environment is fragile. How is it that the encampments were evicted from the Black River area but this issue is tolerated along the La Crosse River between the Asfoor and Veterans Trails? Both areas are located in the flood plain. Many homeowners are affected as well as those who wish to enjoy the bike/walking trails.

We are aware of plans to assist the homeless with the Pathways Project and applaud anything that can be done to help them secure adequate housing. We are aware that this is anticipated to take several years. Are we to anticipate that we will need to wait years before the encampments across from our home are addressed? The encampments were not tolerated along the Black River and we hope that they will not be tolerated along the La Crosse River.

Thank you for your consideration.

Kathy and Tom Zieja
14 Copeland Ave.
La Crosse, WI

5/20 to 5/21/2024

Last night around 11:45 pm, I was awakened by a woman yelling and swearing in the marsh encampment. It was so loud, I thought at first that she was on the trail right under my bedroom window. Occasionally a man's voice interjected like maybe he was trying to calm her down. I couldn't understand many words, other than "F-bombs". Close to midnight, when I got up to get my phone, their voices trailed off, like they were walking toward the Veteran's trail, but I could still hear her. And his voice was getting louder. At 12:05 am I called 911. The dispatcher said she would send someone as soon as possible. About this time, men in other areas of the marsh started yelling, "Shut up" and 'Shut the F*** Up". She screamed back, 'No!" and more "F-bombs". Around 12:15 am, I saw flashlights in the vicinity of the big green tent with the yellow flags around it, and hear a dog bark and growl loudly. Then everything stopped. It was eerily quiet. Until sometime after 4 am, and after the loud thunder. Then it sounded like she was going to get started again, but it was muffled, and it didn't continue.

Fran Rybarik (#211)