

## Elsen, Nikki

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**From:** Janet Koppelman <kentonjan@aol.com>  
**Sent:** Sunday, June 2, 2024 5:46 PM  
**To:** Elsen, Nikki  
**Subject:** Marsh Concerns Letter not included in agenda ipacket?

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On May 22, 2024 I emailed a letter regarding my concerns about the marsh encampment to the mayor and city council and board of public works. The email was addressed to individuals rather than using the ZZ ... members address (I was not aware of that at the time. I assume those addressees received the email,, although the only response/acknowledgement I had was from Erin Goggin. I'm not sure what happened, but I would appreciate it if my letter could be added to the packet.

### **Text of the letter is as follows:**

To Mayor Reynolds, members of the La Crosse City Council, and the Public Works Committee:

My name is Janet Koppelman and I live at The Landings by the marsh. I am also a Cancer survivor. In 2019 I had a call back on my mammogram, follow up revealed a small lump, a biopsy revealed a malignancy, and surgery was scheduled within the month. The lump and lymph nodes were removed and treatment and monitoring continues even now. Early detection and treatment has been pivotal in my survival and quality of life. The homeless situation faced by La Crosse is not the equivalent of cancer (being unsheltered is not cancer or a crime), but I share this story because I believe it can inform our city's response to the multilayered issues of dealing with this challenge.

In April a number of us who live by the marsh addressed the public works committee to urgently request a camping ban for the city owned marsh area to protect this fragile community resource - one of our recreational and educational areas of which we pride ourselves - essentially La Crosse's "Backyard". As residents of the Landings with a 24/7 front row seat, we witnessed the migration from the diaspora of the Black River encampment north of Riverside Park to the area between the biking/hiking trails of the marsh. We expressed to you great urgency as we saw tents spread on a daily basis to this fragile area.

Your Response? At that meeting you voted to defer a decision on this urgent request for **SIXTY DAYS**. You dismissed the concerns and observations expressed by your constituents. Since then the situation that you apparently believed to be benign and harmless has burgeoned into an unregulated campground, a marketplace for drugs and other illicit activity supporting a criminal subculture in the middle of La Crosse's Backyard. The City has fostered a dangerous environment in a floodplain - an uninhabitable area with no sanitary facilities in what we believe to be a violation of city code:

*Chapter 115 – zoning, Division 2- Floodplain Zoning; Section 115-280 Floodway District” (FW).  
(d) Prohibited uses*

*(1) habitable structures with high flood damage potential, or those not associated with permanent open space uses.*

*(2) storing materials that are buoyant, flammable, explosive, injurious to property, water quality, or human, animal, plant, fish or other aquatic life.*

**(3) Uses NOT in harmony with or detrimental to uses permitted in the adjoining districts.**

By allowing this encampment to continue and grow the City has misappropriated a public resource; you have stolen it from public use; and you have turned our public property into a dangerous and unlawful sanctuary.

I hope all of you have read the litany of issues from our building's "incident log" which was forwarded to all of you on May 21st by our board member, Jon Ellefson. These are just some of the things we have observed - multiple residents have observed them and these problems are on-going. We have all heard and witnessed all sorts of disturbances, fighting, drug deals and even gunfire. Our commercial neighbors are faced with disturbances and theft as well. Even on Mother's Day we endured several loud disputes as flurries of "F-bombs" floated across the river. This is part of the daily routine here along the La Crosse River now. It is disturbing, dangerous and intolerable. Our Fire and Police and all city departments and services pay the price.

If any property owner in this city had even a fraction of what's going on in the marsh happening on their property, the "city inspector" would waste no time enforcing whatever rules were being violated. I know this is true having been "busted" for some curling shingles on one side of a small shed on the alley of my previous home. Why are the city's own rules and regulations not enforced on city owned property?

We have gone from a handful of tents in late March to over 40 by mid-May. While your "Pathways Plan" provides long term solutions that we all hope work, this does not address immediate needs and issues. If someone is bleeding, you do not tell the patient to check back in 60 days to see how things are going. If someone has a cancer diagnosis, you do not delay treatment.

Additionally, it is not the role of our City to be enablers. Most of those living in the marsh appear to be relatively young, savvy and resourceful - they need to be to survive. While we understand that there are mental health and addiction issues, living where we do we regularly observe some incongruous sights and behavior. I watched from my balcony as a twenty-ish man wrote up his "Hungry, please help" sign on some cardboard and then hopped on a really nice looking bike and rode away south on the bike path. We have observed a boat traveling back and forth along the river multiple times during the day and under cover of darkness lit only by a flashlight. (**Update:** we have recently learned that that individual has been arrested on an outstanding warrant.) We see flashlights and lanterns moving about throughout the night. Dogs are reportedly running loose, and we hear them barking and growling regularly. We've seen solar panels set up, I've seen and heard what sounds like sawing and hammering. Is there a new development going up in the marsh? Do we have our very own "Hooverville?", or perhaps "MayorReynoldsville"? Is this your legacy?

The La Crosse community, nationally recognized as one of the 50 best cities, deserves better. We cannot defer definitive action to call a halt to all of this activity. While we expect the city to address the needs of those without appropriate shelter, we also expect our officials to serve and defend the best interests of everyone in our city and the city's property (OUR property). You must operate on both levels. We expect and deserve this from our leadership. What are you waiting for?

Janet Koppelman

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