

Craig, Sondra

From: Joella Striebel <joellastriebel@gmail.com>
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To: ZZ Council Members; ZZ City Clerk External
Subject: 23-0673 Opposition

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Members of J&A & City Council,

After watching Tuesday evening's meeting to update the community on the City and County governments' plans to work together to provide true Housing First solutions to our homelessness crisis, I felt hopeful about this issue for the first time in a long time. It was refreshing to finally hear someone (my thanks to Mr. Sampson) effectively speak about Housing First solutions in clear, firm, evidence-based ways. The failures on this issue under Mayor Reynolds have been incredible and unacceptable, and while meaningful solutions are still a few years off, it felt as though there was finally a path forward that cares for our most vulnerable neighbors.

Unfortunately, this feeling of hope was short-lived when just a few hours later, I noticed the short-circuited legislation, agenda item 23-0763, rushing to criminalize homelessness (and...napping in a hammock in a park, as many of our neighbors with homes regularly do) in our community. This ordinance is cruel and inhumane.

Our neighbors residing in parks are living through one of the most profound traumas humans can experience. Lacking safe housing leads to hunger, sleep deprivation, poor access to hygiene. These folks aren't "camping." They are surviving, and many of them, just barely. We learned in Tuesday night's meeting that there is literally nowhere for them to go. The shelter is full. Those of all economic circumstances who experience long bouts of hunger and sleep deprivation behave in ways that are considered impolite by many of us. They are rightfully angry, their nervous systems are constantly activated in Fight or Flight mode, and they may experience symptoms of psychosis, not necessarily related to a mental health condition, but due to hunger and sleep deprivation. They live their lives in danger while being cruelly mocked and harassed by community members, business owners, and police.

The refrain from many who have not themselves experienced homelessness, and have not taken the time to truly get to know and listen to people who have, is a chorus of "they don't want help" and "they like being homeless." While this may be true for a tiny minority of folks living in parks, the vast majority do not want to live out their lives in unsafe, dirty conditions constantly subjected to violence and danger. "They choose homelessness" is a story we tell ourselves to protect us from the reality that like 1 in 25 of our fellow Americans, we, too, could one day be in their shoes. If we make homelessness an individual moral failing, rather than a failing of our society as a whole and our community specifically, we can believe it could never happen to us.

Forcing people trying to survive in public spaces to be constantly on the move doesn't make the problem better, it makes it worse. Historically, those residing in parks have been violently awakened in the middle of the night and made to move along, only adding to their sleep deprivation and exacerbating their trauma. Further, if there is to be effective enforcement of this ordinance, which I can hardly fathom, it will serve only to erect additional barriers to future efforts to secure housing and employment, leaving people with criminal records and fines they have no means to pay.

Without first implementing the Housing First solutions referenced on Tuesday evening, this ordinance is simply cruel and inhumane. There is a popular saying along the lines of "those who need the most love ask for it in the most unloving ways." Those of us with safe roofs over our heads and food in our bellies have an opportunity here to love our neighbors who need it the most, despite the apparently unloving ways they are asking for it. I ask you to vote on this as though you or someone you love may one day be forced to survive in public without a safe place to call home.

Thank you for your service to our city and for your careful deliberation on this complex topic.

Sincerely,

Joella Striebel
District 2 Resident
District 9 Business Owner