



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 8, 2020

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City Recommends Park Board Approve Update to Special Use Policy

Bloomington, Ind. - This afternoon, the City's Parks and Recreation Department, with the support of the administration, will recommend that the City's Board of Park Commissioners amend the Park and Facility Policy (#13040) to prohibit "camping upon or otherwise inhabiting any property, structure, or facility of the department, at any time without a permit." Currently, the policy requires that a special use permit be obtained for certain activities in and uses of the park, including, among other uses, "camping on lands of the department or inhabiting any structure or facility overnight without a permit."

The recommendation to amend the special use permit policy is being made in response to an increasing presence of tents and other makeshift structures in several City park properties overnight (in violation of the existing special use policy) and throughout the day.

Quasi-permanent installations in park properties--on lawns, in wooded areas and underneath park shelters--can limit and/or discourage access to these areas by a broad range of users.

Parks are publicly owned properties acquired, developed, and maintained for the positive development and well-being of everyone in the community, and protecting full access for all residents is fundamental to their capacity to enhance health and quality of life for all.

Together with nonprofit partners in the social services, the City has allocated resources and personnel to support and engage with people who are spending the most time in downtown parks, including many who have created encampments there. From mid-September through late November, the Parks Department led a ten-week “Public Health in Parks” (PHIP) partnership with the Monroe County Health Department, IU Health, and Centerstone to place representatives from the City and the partnering groups in Seminary Park throughout the day to build relationships with people who use the park, and provide assistance, including PPE, water and snacks, warm hats, gloves and socks, as well as HIV and HCV testing and connections with other providers. The Bloomington Police Department’s Downtown Resource Officers, Neighborhood Resource Specialists, and social workers have also actively engaged recently with regular parks users to identify needs and help connect them to appropriate programs or services. Parks specialists stationed at Seminary Park as part of the PHIP partnership and BPD officers report that numerous park users have indicated that they are not generally using parks and park structures as residences or emergency shelters, but rather as social gathering places.

In anticipation of today’s decision, City staff has coordinated with area shelter directors and other partners to help prepare frequent park users for a possible change in the way the park may be used and connect them with options for daytime resources and overnight shelter, if needed. Area shelters currently report availability of overnight accommodations and daytime resources (at Beacon’s Shalom Center and Wheeler Mission), with the Winter Contingency Shelter for Women, funded through a partnership between the City of Bloomington and Monroe County Government, set to open shortly. Those without a home with COVID-19 symptoms or a positive test result may isolate at the Monroe County Safe Recovery Site.

The City supports and partners with multiple social service agencies offering assistance to residents confronting homelessness through its Jack Hopkins Social Service Grants program, which has distributed \$400,000 in 2020, and through dedicated funds administered by the BPD (to be administered by the City’s Community and Family Resources Department in 2021).

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