

Dear Council Members,

I'm reaching out to you today in regard to proposed Ordinance 21-06, which would, among other things, allow overnight camping in our public parks. I do not believe this legislation is in the best interest of our community, and I've been clear with those City Council members bringing this forward that, while I believe we share many values and goals, my administration does not support this ordinance.

It is my administration's position that sleeping outside, especially during the winter, is simply not safe and that people experiencing homelessness deserve to be offered a safe, warm location. To that end we have been working closely with social service providers to help assure there is safe, adequate emergency shelter for all who will take advantage of it. Allowing individuals to live in our parks in any season, however, is at best a short-term patch with significant negative repercussions for our wider community. It is not the answer for unhoused individuals or the many residents and visitors using our parks for recreation. In partnership with other community organizations, we are working diligently instead on longer term solutions to the complex issues involved in housing insecurity, which requires time, resources and the cooperation of other local government entities, social service agencies and other private entities.

We have heard from a number of concerned residents, some of whom support this legislation as the appropriate way to proceed while others disagree. I share the concerns, and believe all are in agreement that our goal is safe, affordable housing for all who choose to call Bloomington home. But we differ on the idea of camping in our public parks as one of the steps on that path to affordable housing.

What are the key points of concern?

Ordinance 21-06 would allow camping, including tents, in any City of Bloomington Park, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Remember that our Board of Parks Commissioners recently affirmed tent structures only during the hours our parks are open, from 5:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.

The City would not be permitted to close any camp, regardless when or how it began or who is staying there, unless there is available "transitional or permanent" housing and "wrap around services" for all those in the camp. Available beds at emergency homeless shelters, for example, Shalom Center and Wheeler Mission, would not count for this analysis. The current transitional housing and permanent housing in Monroe County designated for these purposes is modest, and/or largely occupied. Creating more of either type of housing is certainly a goal of this administration, and we have been working as a community to expand it, but doing so is very expensive, and typically led by nonprofits who are unlikely to be able to generate significant new capacity without substantial new funding sources. The result, practically speaking, could likely be that any camps created could not be closed for the foreseeable future.

The ordinance would permit the city to designate areas in parks and/or on other public property where camps are allowed. However, such areas must be within one mile of an organization that

provides prepared meals to unhoused individuals at least five days a week, and must provide “adequate space” for each individual and access to restrooms. In other words, if the City prefers not to permit camping in all parks or on all public property, it must choose certain areas of parks or public property nearest to organizations that provide meals to people experiencing homelessness. This restricts the City’s options for designating areas to a limited number of targeted parks and public properties.

In addition, there has been no exploration of the City’s responsibility to comply with any state or county health regulations that might apply to camps a City actively permits on its property. At the very least, the state fire code contains provisions that would need to be enforced, and there may well be other regulations related to public health, disability access, inspections, etc. that could impose a significant additional burden on staff and lead to potential financial obligations and/or liability for the City.

The City also would be obligated to catalog and store one 96-gallon container of personal belongings per person for at least 60 days should an encampment be closed. This would require an unknown amount of staff time, storage capacity and expense.

In summary:

- We have not had time to even begin to estimate the fiscal and operational impacts of this plan as presented.
- Insufficient time has been given to partner social service agencies to adequately address the current conditions and their collective capacity to manage such a regime.
- Unintended consequences have not been studied, for example, a potential increase in individuals experiencing homelessness coming to the community to take advantage of permitted camping in parks, or to be provided with a right to long-term housing and wrap-around services.
- We believe a regional approach to this issue must be explored.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to discuss this further with you.

Mayor John Hamilton