

September 2, 2020

North Park Neighbourhood Association

Sheltering at Central Park: collected feedback from housed and unhoused residents and suggestions for long term sheltering in City of Victoria parks

Attention: Mayor, Council, Shannon Perkins (Bylaw), Thomas Soulliere, Nav Sidhu, Janelle Wyman (Parks), Bill Eisenhauer, Sheldon Johnson (Engagement), Michael Hill (Neighbourhood Liaison)

CC: NPNA Board, NPNA Land Use Advisor

The NPNA is posting weekly updates on the status of sheltering in Central Park here:

<http://npna.ca/sheltering-in-parks/>

Suggestions:

The suggested actions listed below would balance the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness and those of local residents, and are based on the feedback that both housed and unhoused residents have been providing to the NPNA since April. Feedback follows suggestions.

- That a limit to the number of shelters be established in Central Park and all parks where camping is allowed
- That a distributed model with equity criteria as the basis for the distribution be implemented
- That instead of increased police budget for security at parks, this budget be allocated to a neutral trusted party that can monitor capacity at parks, and keep updated records of who is sheltering at each park
 - That this neutral party assists in moving tent residents to a park that suits their needs, takes into account chosen family groupings, and park capacities.
- Shower services be expanded with either or both;
 - Opening of shower facilities at Royal Athletic Park
 - A shower trailer that can move between approved camping locations on a predetermined schedule
- That secure storage be provided or expanded upon for those sheltering in approved parks to reduce theft within parks and to allow those sheltering in parks the option to leave their tents to access work, medical care, harm reduction, and treatment.
- That a schedule of supports and services be established in collaboration with existing service providers (including harm reduction, wellness checks in tents, counselling, peer support, assistance with housing applications, medical attention, security, storage, on site meal delivery, etc)
- That should the Council member motion that seeks to receive feedback from tent residents (with Coalition to End Homelessness) also takes into account the feedback and experiences of nearby housed residents
- That the locations chosen in City of Victoria parks take into account areas that become swamp/underwater in the fall and winter - such as much of Central Park.
- That existing fencing at locations such as Pandora Boulevard, Topaz Park, Centennial Square be removed and be included in distribution of limited number of tent residents at these locations
- [That Council supports a request that Oak Bay Lodge be used for immediate indoor accommodations for people experiencing homelessness.](#)

Community feedback

The feedback below, organized by theme was gathered through phone calls, emails, conversations with housed and unhoused residents in and around Central Park.

Safety:

- Many local residents are no longer using the playground, sports fields, or outdoor gym at Central Park due to feeling of unsafety
 - Many families with younger children/grandchildren feel especially unsafe spending time in, or walking through the park
- Increased conflicts between tent residents, and between tent residents and nearby community members
 - There have been several accounts in the past week about tent residents harassing/following/threatening park users.
 - There have been many reports of violent incidents, fights, verbal and physical altercations, and generally very disruptive behaviour in Central Park.
- Property theft and damage to property
 - Residents having to alarm houses when they never have in the past
 - Tent residents damaging property at nearby residences
 - Numerous accounts of break ins at nearby residences
 - These incidents are taking place at all hours of the day and night, disrupting sleep of adults and children, and leaving many residents feeling as though they need to be constantly aware of the situation at the park, assessing risk, and calling 911 regularly
- Tent residents express a declining sense of safety as well.
- Confirmed by Vic PD officer - Bylaw Services has been instructed not to interfere with campers in close proximity to playgrounds unless they are actually camped on the wood chips - that council has directed them to turn a blind eye to proximity. The officer was as frustrated as we are by this approach.
 - Police officers are requesting community members to lobby council to end the situation in Central Park
- The situation in Central Park is unmanageable
 - It is taking a toll on the mental, physical, and emotional health of nearby residents.

Security and storage requirements in Central Park

- Due to theft and lack of secure storage, tent residents are unable to leave their structure to access meals, healthcare, harm reduction, etc
- Update from Parks: nightly security patrols beginning Sept. 1
- There are too many shelters in Central Park
 - A few individuals have taken it upon themselves to maintain order, work with police to get disruptive/violent individuals out of the park.
 - There are too many people sheltering in Central Park with not enough resources or support
- Secure storage is required in order to reduce hoarding and mess around tents
 - One resident has offered to be responsible for the storage. Could the City work with this individual?

Proximity to Playground and George Jay School

- Central Park is used as a cut through for many students to walk from the bus stop in front of Crystal Pool through to George Jay
- There are tents way too close to the playground.
 - But there are no regulations on how far away from playgrounds, pathways, sports fields the tents are required to be (just that they cannot be IN the playground, etc)
 - The buffer zone highlighted on this report puts the tents WAY too close to the playground

Neighbourhood Demographics (access to alternative green space, access to alternative forms of recreation)

- Many residents feel that Central Park is not a suitable location for continuous outdoor sheltering
 - Low income neighbours with little access to alternative green space / recreation are being displaced
 - North Park is a low income neighbourhood with little access to alternative playground space, and affordable covid friendly recreation.
 - It is also felt that permanent camping is inconsistent with the covenant that the park be used exclusively for the recreation purposes
- Quote: "When your council allows people to shelter all day in public parks, they are also removing access to those parks for people who do not feel comfortable with the behaviour of the campers. In the case of Central Park, you are taking away a viable public space from many lower-income families and new immigrants. North Park/Quadra Village is home to many new Canadians and economically-disadvantaged kids who use the park."

Inadequate access to hygiene and overcrowding in Central Park

- Two portable washrooms, and one handwashing sink is not adequate for 65+ shelters
 - Parks update: 1 additional portable washroom to be added approx. Sept. 2
- The current situation is not safe from a COVID-19 perspective.
 - Physical distancing between campers or tents is not being enforced.
 - Trespass on private property and continual rifling of vehicles often without the owner's knowledge is a risk for spread of contagion that is all but impossible to guard against.
- 4 metre distancing between tents is not being observed (as outlined on Bylaw dept. handout)
- Whether sheltering continues in Central Park or elsewhere, those sheltering outdoors need adequate access to hygiene.
- There is no access to showers at Central Park
 - Across Victoria, there are only 80 available shower spots per day.
 - 20 at Rock Bay landing - which primarily serve those on Ellice, and
 - 60 at Our Place
 - Both locations are only open during the day
- Bylaw has offered several individuals the choice of either Beacon Hill Park or Central Park
 - Bylaw is then leaving individuals' belongings on the Pembroke side of Central Park closest to the playground as the Queen's Ave side is full

- When asked why Bylaw was dropping a new tent resident off at the tree line adjacent to the playground, they said that due to physical distancing and a need for shade, this was the only spot left. This suggests to me, that the park is full.

Coordination of services and supports in Central Park

- A schedule of outreach services and supports are needed at any location where outdoor sheltering is taking place
- This should include:
 - on site meal delivery,
 - regular harm reduction drop off,
 - Wound care, street nurse assistance,
 - wellness checks in tents
 - assistance with BC housing and supportive housing forms
 - trauma counselling (a repeated request)
 - Monitoring of park capacity, and record keeping of tent residents
 - security
 - secure storage for belongings