



North Park Neighbourhood Association
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Re: North Park requests a renewed commitment to a distributed model for outdoor sheltering

Attention: Mayor, Council, Shannon Perkins (Bylaw), Thomas Soulliere, Nav Sidhu (Parks), Bill Eisenhauer, Sheldon Johnson (Engagement), Grace Lore, Murray Rankin, Laurel Collins, Stephen Andrew, Stefanie Hardman

CC: NPNA Board, NPNA Land Use Advisor

Date: November 20, 2020

The North Park Neighbourhood Association asks Mayor and Council to reaffirm their commitment to the distributed model of temporary sheltering in City parks. Your commitment is crucial:

- The state of sheltering in Central Park is not working, and it is getting worse
- First attempts at a distributed model were successful (see: Oaklands Park)
- Successful distributed sheltering cannot be done without the support of Mayor and Council.

It is unfortunate that the most defining characteristics of the handling of the homelessness crisis made apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic is the reactive approach taken by government. This has resulted in both the repeated displacement of campers as well as an highly inequitable burden being experienced in neighbourhoods like North Park.

Despite this inequitable burden, North Park and the NPNA has worked cooperatively with both the City and with the unhoused population. After the City again [failed to fund the NPNA](#), we applied for COVID-19 response funding from the Canada Red Cross to support North Park residents. Once sheltering in parks began, responding to a lack of support from government, we stepped in and diverted our Red Cross funding, volunteer time, and staff time to help North Park's new unhoused neighbours.

What North Park and the NPNA ask in return is simply a good faith effort to share the burden.

From the outset, the rationale by the City for choosing some parks instead of others sheltering was access to running water and washrooms. Central Park was the only park chosen that had neither of these. Nevertheless, the City of Victoria began moving people and their belongings to Central Park. It was only after these efforts led to a concentration in Central Park that porta-potties were eventually brought in and a garden hose connected to an old sink was installed



for a handwashing station. All other parks (including Centennial Square) have 24/7, permanent washroom infrastructure. Fast forward to the end of August, when the Mayor unilaterally cleared Centennial Square thereby [doubling the population in Central Park overnight](#). Predictably, the criminal element entrenched in Centennial Square did not evaporate, it simply moved to this already overburdened neighbourhood.

Banning camping in Centennial Square (despite the fact that there is currently no camping in Centennial Square) was a symbolic motion by the Mayor. The symbolism North Park hears is that the downtown business community's appropriate share of the burden is precisely *zero* and our small neighbourhood's appropriate share is "most of the tents". The number of structures in Central Park reached a height of 122 in the middle of October, and has since plateaued in the high 70's.

Where is the equity in that? This undermined any "we're all in it together," sentiment, and trust and optimism is being crushed among our neighbours. Leaving Centennial Square on the list of approved parks - with the limited number of tents allowed by the new bylaws - would have made a strong statement for an equitable distribution. This would have provided the moral ground to tell neighbours in all of the City's neighbourhoods that their burden is fair.

It is laudable that Council does not want to see campers disrupted, but past (in)actions have resulted in an untenable situation for North Park. The bylaws that Council have passed - consisting mainly of offsets - *require* a redistribution of campers. The NPNA has been working in good faith with Bylaw to compassionately and gently support campers into compliance with the bylaws. It is grossly unfair to Bylaw staff and to our members to then undermine their efforts by statements from the Mayor and Council backing away from the distributed model. Bylaw staff are working so hard to make this situation better. We have been impressed by how the model has shifted from an "us vs. them" situation to a place where Bylaw officers are working directly with campers to build trust and share information and help people come into compliance. We see this work everyday. The motion by Councillor Isitt modifying the bylaws mid-stream without any consideration for the consequences, directly undermined this effort. The job of Bylaw is already all but impossible and in two months has failed to get an appreciable number of campers in Central Park into compliance. If these bylaws are not enforceable, or you will not enforce them, then it would appear that the whole experiment is a complete failure, and our trust has been betrayed.

At last count there were 70 structures in Central Park which would support a maximum of approximately 12 under the current bylaws. We are asking that the Mayor and Council either stand by the existing bylaws and support the staff you have asked to enforce them, or revoke them. As a reminder, these bylaws did nothing to incorporate [NPNA advice](#) and input into the best place to put campers (RAP, or playing fields, or hard surfaces, and furthest away from properties



and playgrounds). In several instances, the reason the City has given us for why we could not plan better and provide services is that it would encourage more campers in North Park.

Council would also do well to consider the potential liability to the City that would be incurred by the failure to enforce the existing bylaws. These bylaws included social distancing measures aimed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 both within the homeless community and to the wider public. Failure to subsequently enforce these safety rules on City property, [during a second wave](#), after having formally acknowledged the problem and the remedy, could leave the City open to lawsuits.

The need for management and control remains urgent, because the ongoing influx of campers hampers any efforts to provide services. Currently, the only way to control numbers is to make it more uncomfortable and withhold services. Any help offered to unhoused residents is considered enabling. This is not a situation we are comfortable with. The lack of action of Council and avoidance of managing this situation has created tension and fights between neighbours. Anybody who helps is a target. One of the key tenets of the distributed model is that if we have assurances that we can predict and control the numbers in our community, then we can step in and support people without fear of destroying it. We need some assurances that it is possible to reduce and maintain a lower number of structures in Central Park. As soon as that happens, we are ready and willing to jump in and help (more than we have.) As it is, more people are being forced into self-preservation mode, day by day.

We appreciate that the Mayor wants to move people from park to housing rather than from park to park. However, the predictable result of this is that North Park is expected to endure an unlimited amount of camping in Central Park for the foreseeable future. Despite the Mayor's optimism and hard work in securing housing options, there is no guarantee the number of housing units that will be generated or the timescale for this. Another crucial factor not included is the rate of influx of homeless people whether local or non-local. Despite heroic efforts by Bylaw staff in moving people out of Central Park we are currently experiencing net growth. It is not enough to be optimistic here.

We are asking that Mayor and Council reaffirm their commitment to the distributed model of camping in City parks. From our perspective, a distributed model is preferable to concentrated clusters. This is exemplified by the small, eight tent community in Oaklands Park. The folks sheltering at Oaklands Park have set up an incredibly strong, safe community. It is quiet, calm, supported by community members, and established with the knowledge of the new and existing bylaws in mind. Volunteers, staff, and park residents learned from experiences of what did and did not to work in Central Park to establish a community in Oaklands Park. And it worked. Oaklands has a group of people — people who we would love to have kept in North Park — living in relative safety. Meanwhile, the situation in Central Park has devolved to the point that service providers and North Park volunteers have been helping campers leave for better, safer neighbourhoods. We



would love to have what we helped set up in Oaklands – a group of campers receiving support, who are community builders. In Central Park, we have a park that has lost its park leaders to other parks, stress, anxiety, and a lack of resources and support.

We need the City to support us, support the Bylaw department, and reaffirm your commitment to a distributed model. We are trying so hard to make things better. Unfortunately, we are seeing divide in the neighbourhood. Volunteers are stretched to the limit, and neighbours have lost trust in the NPNA. We're still trying, but we *need* your help. The NPNA has no community centre, no office space, and no stable funding. The neighbourhood is made up of apartment dwelling families without access to green space, many of whom live below the poverty line. Access to our limited green space has been decreased at a time when we need it the most. We need your support. The distributed model works – visit Oaklands Park and see how it contrasts to Central Park.

In conclusion, we need Council to commit fully to the distributed model. In the current model, this means enforcing the bylaws and having political courage to defend the distributed model and existing bylaws when the campers move to other neighbourhoods. Council would also do well to consider a modest amount of campers downtown, if not in Centennial Square, somewhere else as a symbol to all neighborhoods that there will be equity and consistency. If you want our advice, find a place that is not in greenspace or in a park and will be the best place for camping, with the least disruption (our equivalent of RAP). Then limit that number and support them. That would be leadership. At the very least, reduce the number of people in Central Park now. The tensions are high, the divides entrenching. Relationships with police and public officials are suffering, cynicism is becoming normalized. It will take a long time to come back to being a working community, and every day makes it worse.

Respectfully submitted by,

North Park Neighbourhood Association

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