

Overlook Neighborhood Association

Alexandra Degher, Chair

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January 5, 2021

To: Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioners Jo Ann Hardesty, Dan Ryan, Carmen Rubio and Mingus Mapps

CC: Joint Office of Homeless Services and Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program

Dear Mayor Wheeler and Commissioners Hardesty, Ryan, Rubio and Mapps,

The Overlook Neighborhood Association calls upon the City of Portland, the Joint Office of Homeless Services and the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program to:

- Open small and large managed outdoor shelters in all parts of the city;
- Construct managed homeless villages in all parts of the city modeled on the Kenton Women's Village and the St. Johns Village;
- In all neighborhoods, close unsanctioned campsites located in parks, waterways and public paths, as well as camps where illegal activity has been documented;
- And close the Hazelnut Grove homeless camp on N Greeley Avenue gradually by summer 2021 and work with the Overlook Neighborhood to remediate the site and transform it to public use.

As we begin 2021, the City of Portland must honor its promises to help homeless residents and to support neighborhoods experiencing the harmful side effects of homeless camps. The current situation is a humanitarian catastrophe. Living outdoors puts people's health at risk and leaves them vulnerable to victimization. Meanwhile, campsites are causing environmental damage to our communities, rendering public spaces and parks unusable by the public, and are documented launching points for property damage, theft and other reported crimes.

It is time to do better. The city and the Joint Office of Homeless Services have demonstrated that there are viable models for connecting homeless residents to services and providing shelter in ways that do not require camping illegally in public spaces where basic sanitation and assistance are unavailable.

Organized outdoor homeless shelters have helped during the pandemic. The city should identify more locations throughout the city that can house those sorts of managed facilities. The city also should test larger outdoor shelters with bunkhouses and other alternative shelter.

Even more effective than temporary outdoor shelters have been managed villages with elements of self-governance such as the Kenton Women's Village. It has helped vulnerable residents connect to services and transition to permanent housing. The St. Johns Village follows that model and will shelter additional residents. The city should build on these successful models in neighborhoods throughout Portland.

At the same time, the City of Portland must make good on promises to neighborhoods by removing unsanctioned campsites located in parks, waterways and public paths, as well as camps where illegal activity has been documented. This is the approach called for in the North Portland Joint Statement on

Homelessness signed in 2020 by multiple neighborhoods and nonprofits. City Council and the Homelessness and Urban Camping Impact Reduction Program can demonstrate good faith by closing the Hazelnut Grove camp. Both Mayor Ted Wheeler and his predecessor promised to close Hazelnut Grove since campers illegally occupied the site along a multi-use path in 2015.

When asked about whether he would close Hazelnut Grove on KGW in 2017, Wheeler said, “Yes, just based on what I’ve seen, why are we allowing people with mental health issues or potentially drug and alcohol addiction issues to live in the woods? That’s not a good solution. All of the best practices, all the data shows, if you want people to gain access to the services that get them off the street and keep them off the street, the answer isn’t a tent, the answer is housing with wraparound services, whether it’s shelter or transitional housing.”

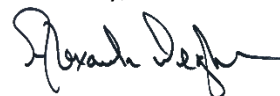
We agree and applaud the city for finding a better alternative. The Joint Office of Homeless Services gave Hazelnut Grove campers first opportunity to move into the St. Johns Village, where wraparound services are available. Those who did not move to St. Johns were connected to shelters and service providers.

The city delivered on its promise to help the residents of Hazelnut Grove. Now it must deliver what it promised to the neighborhood: End the illegal camping at the site. The city should then remediate the site and work with the Overlook Neighborhood to establish a safe, low-impact public use that will deter future camping. This restoration could serve as a model for every neighborhood that wonders what will happen after problem campsites that have damaged natural areas are closed.

The timeline for closing Hazelnut Grove should be cognizant of COVID-19 and seasonal concerns, but if St. Johns Village opens Feb. 1 as planned by the mayor’s office, a gradual shutdown that begins no later than spring and culminates in the summer should be attainable.

By making good on its promises to homeless residents at the Hazelnut Grove camp and to residents of the Overlook Neighborhood, the city will demonstrate that it is serious when it tells Portlanders that it will help all residents succeed, find housing and enjoy a livable city. Let this be the first step toward real progress.

Sincerely,



Alexandra Degher

Overlook Neighborhood Association, Chair



Christian Trejbal

Overlook Neighborhood Association, Vice Chair