



Memorandum

TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND
CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Councilmember Raul Perez

SUBJECT: SEE BELOW

DATE: March 19, 2021

Approved by:

Date: 3/19/2021

SUBJECT: HOMELESSNESS ANNUAL REPORT AND ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC; ENCAMPMENT AND ABATEMENT

RECOMMENDATION

Accept staff recommendation and per my February 4 memorandum¹ immediately identify temporary sanctioned encampment locations on publicly-owned sites for the duration of the Local State of Emergency.

BACKGROUND

In the last few years, San José has made great strides in building much needed shelter for our unhoused, both interim and permanent. But regardless of the progress, the rate in producing these housing solutions is outpaced by the sheer number of those who currently reside on our streets. As we painstakingly wait for more affordable housing developments to come online in the next several years and continue to receive reports that there is a significant shortage of shelter beds, over 5,000 San José residents continue to seek refuge in public spaces such as the City's waterways, parks, and neighborhoods every single day.

The lack of space, access to clean water, proper sanitation, and waste disposal puts unhoused residents at a greater risk for illness and outbreak. In 2017, the State of California declared a state of emergency over a deadly Hepatitis A outbreak within the homeless community, where over 580 individuals became sick and 18 were killed from

¹ https://sjd3.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Rules-Memo_-_Sanctioned-Encampments-and-Abatements.pdf

the disease.² Most recently, COVID-19 outbreaks in Oakland³ and Santa Cruz⁴ highlight how quickly a virus can spread in unsanitary crowded environments. The need for immediate short term solutions is dire, and we must begin to look at temporary encampment solutions now, whether we call it sanctioned or a SOAR site.

It was just this Monday that the City Council ranked an encampment management strategy and unhoused resident safe relocation policy as one of two top priorities for staff to explore in the upcoming fiscal year. The suspension of abatements during the pandemic have allowed more individuals to live in substandard conditions and have caused a strain on public spaces. But even prior to COVID-19, abatements served only as a short term solution, in essence shifting encampments from one location to another, bringing no benefit to our community, both housed and unhoused.

While I agree with my council colleagues in their latest memos of where abatements should take place, I am concerned that we are addressing only one side of the equation and without identifying sanctioned sites, we are perpetuating the problem. Currently, of the 16 largest encampments in the City and identified SOAR sites, 11 of those sites run along our creeks. If we are recommending that abatements focus on sites near schools or in hard-to-reach encampments in creeks and waterways, is it acceptable that those 11 sites simply be pushed into residential and industrial areas?

In my District, I am fielding concerns of businesses losing customers, employees receiving tickets because they have to resort to parking in time zones, and neighbors deliberately avoiding certain blocks when they walk because we do not have a place for unhoused residents to go after we abate. In addition, the City will eventually be required to move the encampments under the flight path as directed by the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA). Abatements only kick the can down the road. We must look at all solutions. We must continue to provide services at SOAR sites, we must look for funding for more transitional housing, and we must identify sanctioned encampment locations.

Sanctioned encampments will provide the basic living conditions that most of us take for granted on a daily basis, such as safe and stable shelter that has been absolutely essential during these trying times. It will help end the unhoused from being unjustly criminalized and the disruptive and traumatic nature of the abatement process. These locations should be service rich, allow for greater access to health care and better case management to transition individuals into permanent housing. To further clarify my February 4th memo to the Rules Committee, we should identify at least one sanctioned encampment location, but given the need we should be open to looking at multiple locations.

There simply cannot be a discussion of an encampment management strategy and a safe relocation policy, without a conversation about sanctioned encampments. If we truly intend to improve the living conditions of those currently in encampments and want to

² <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-ln-hepatitis-california-20171013-story.html>

³ <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/06/02/coronavirus-outbreak-11-test-positive-at-oakland-homeless-camp/>

⁴ <https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/2021/03/04/covid-19-outbreak-in-santa-cruz-homeless-camp-prompts-attention/>

alleviate the environmental strain that has since compounded in the pandemic, dedicated locations that the unhoused can safely relocate to must be identified for these policies to work. The pandemic has forced us to act quickly to protect our unhoused community and we must continue this momentum and push further to protect our most vulnerable community in San José throughout this pandemic and beyond.