

A makeshift camp of nearly 60 people relocated under the Tilikum Crossing on Southeast Third Avenue and Harrison Street, a location the city has identified as a possible new site for Right 2 Dream Too.



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Sweeps cause more havoc for homeless and housed

How does one come even close to describing the experience of human suffering? Is it the look in a person's eyes after having completely given up hope or the anger that boils up someone's voice or actions? Is it the addiction that one succumbs to after experiencing multiple nervous breakdowns and becoming homeless? Is it the mentally ill woman mumbling to herself, clearly distraught, and drenched to the bone, rocking back and forth under a bridge?

As I walked away from talking to people this week that had been displaced from the latest round of homeless sweeps, it's a question I went over in my mind.

What could I write that hasn't been already written a thousand

times? Would there be a way to describe the reality that would even make a difference, or deserved to see print?

As a writer, you try not to let those thoughts gain ground. You ignore such thoughts and push on, much like trauma. One compartmentalizes things.

The trauma of actually experiencing homelessness, and the secondary trauma of people working with people in poverty, is so illogical that it's hard to describe or put down in words. Having to balance high-level conversations and bureaucracies of how to advocate for more housing resources for people coupled with the daily grind of people suffering had clearly gotten to me.

More than a week ago the city of Portland, the Oregon Department of Transportation and others began a weeklong sweep of people experiencing homelessness in Southeast Portland. From the river to 12th Avenue, from Burnside down to Powell, the city proclaimed that it was no longer business as usual for people on the streets.

We all saw it coming, possibly everyone except for those surviving on the streets.

For months, members of the cycling community had been complaining about homeless camps on bike paths throughout Southeast Portland. Safety was a major concern. One cycling advocate I talked to this winter told me his partner didn't feel safe biking down the Springwater Corridor anymore. To add fuel to the fire, stolen bicycles had been found in some of the camps in Southeast at the same time bike advocates were calling for the Portland Police Bureau to create a stolen bicycle task force. Street Roots knew then that it was just a

matter of time before law enforcement and the city made its move.

For years Portland police have been letting people sleep and camp in what the police and advocates call low-impact areas — in certain parks, under bridges, in industrial neighborhoods, etc. Many camps ebb and flow in numbers depending on a range of circumstances — enforcement in a particular neighborhood or area, complaints, safety, weather, etc. In the winter, camps tend to grow in numbers. In the summer, historically, with the arrival of tourists, the police ramp up enforcement and people tend to thin out throughout the city.

The difference this year is two-fold. The cycling community being vocal about homeless camps is one aspect. The other is the rapid growth in inner Southeast Portland. More development, a growing and changing demographic of residents and an expanding business community all led to an organized effort against visibly homeless population in the neighborhood. A neighborhood that tended to support homeless efforts was now calling for the homeless to be removed and throwing up roadblocks to locating Right 2 Dream Too to their side of the river.

With Rose Festival and Fleet Week on the horizon, the city acted. The goal was to displace homeless camps and to deliver a message that this summer people were not going to be allowed to congregate in inner Southeast Portland. Instead of doing what typically would amount to a week-long crackdown on homeless camps, the police and the city have said they will continue to keep the pressure on.

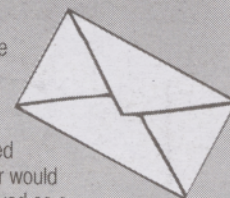
So, the sweeps began. TV news stations and newspaper reporters swarmed. The police and the city delivered sound bites to the media that people on the streets were not being displaced, but instead being offered social services and in some cases permanent housing. When in fact, law enforcement was displacing people with nothing new to offer but the same waiting lists. To make matters worse, folks on the streets claim, people were receiving tickets and in some cases taken to jail.

Compounding the chaos, people on the streets said police pointed them to the proposed new site for Right 2 Dream Too — potentially poisoning the well. Now, instead of a well-organized camp under the established leadership of Right 2 Dream Too, more than 60 people now gathered under the Tilikum Crossing — defeated,

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Write in

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DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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