

Springwater Corridor challenges community's will

The Springwater Corridor is a 21-mile multi-use path and trail that runs through both Clackamas and Multnomah County, traveling through both Gresham and Portland.

The path follows the beautiful Johnson Creek watershed, a critical drainage basin for the region. Its paved trail provides a healthy transportation option for thousands of pedestrians and bikers on a daily basis.

It's a shining example of how to maintain a natural setting within urban America.

It's also an example of how Portland and the region have created one of the greenest urban environments in the world without any real strategy for people experiencing poverty.

Today, the corridor weaves itself in and out of changing and gentrifying neighborhoods. It's out with the old and in with the new. The times they are changing.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of more than 30,000 affordable housing units and a rapidly changing region — it's also home to hundreds of people experiencing homelessness who now camp on the path.

Instead of tranquility, the path is an example of how multi-jurisdictional government entities and a growing affluent population try to address a changing landscape of massive poverty and desperate survival.

In early August, Portland along with other law enforcement agencies will most likely sweep hundreds of people out of the corridor.

Both Street Roots and myself have been inundated by inquires about how we feel about the situation and what's the right answer. At the same time social-service agencies, who are already in triage mode helping hundreds of vulnerable residents citywide, including those on the Springwater Corridor, are now being asked to stop what they are doing to help coordinate the displacement of hundreds of people.

What follows are many of the questions I've gotten over the past week and how I've answered them.

Are there really 500 sleeping on the Spring Water Corridor?

No one really knows. Someone came up with the number 500 and that's what the media ran with. Apparently, Portland has the largest homeless camp in America. Click bait at its best.

Well, how many people are there?

Again, no one knows.

Are there hundreds?

Yes. Along with thousands more people experiencing homelessness in the region.

Is the Spring Water Corridor really unsafe for both the community and people experiencing homelessness?

I would never attempt to say that anyone feeling unsafe isn't true. No question, it's a delicate situation. Saying that, it's not like people experiencing homelessness were safe with or without the Springwater Corridor.

People experiencing homelessness certainly won't be safe after the corridor is swept. It's not a kind world out there.

Are neighbors overreacting?

Again, I can't attempt to tell another person's story. Saying that, it's really hard to cut through the noise and determine what's real and what's not. People in Southwest Portland were just as upset as neighbors are on the Springwater Corridor about having a vulnerable women's homeless shelter in their neighborhood. You tell me. Poverty is messy.

It's much easier to think about tackling the problem when it's not right in front of you. People are frustrated, no question. It's also true that I've seen more hateful comments directed toward the homeless in the past year than I've seen in all my time on the streets.

Where will people go after sweeping the trail?

Back into the neighborhoods and downtown. The reality is that it is harder and harder to find a location to bed down these days if you're homeless. Areas of the city that have historically absorbed people experiencing homelessness — the backside of the Pearl, St. Francis Park, the old Washington High School, the inner Eastside Portland and Old Town are all being developed and gentrified. In many ways we're a product of our own success and the rise in camping in public parks is a direct result. It may sound rhetorical, but there is no place for people to go.

Has Mayor's Charlie Hales homeless camping plan failed?

That's an impossible question. Do you mean have we failed as a nation by not providing basic housing infrastructure that allows for hundreds of thousands of American's to have no safe place to call home? Yes, we have failed.

Being a mayor in today's climate, especially on the West Coast, means having to deal with an almost impossible situation.

Legalizing camping has created a series of challenges. No question. Obviously, the issue has been put in people's faces. I'm not sure that's a bad thing. Prior to legalized camping homelessness continued to grow, but there was little political motivation by the general public or the state legislature to do anything about it. It was businesses as usual. That's not the case today.

Flipping the script, criminalization isn't the answer. Not only is it inhumane, it's not cost effective and actually hinders people's ability to access housing.

It's impossible for any mayor to get it completely right given the circumstances. It's quicksand. I do think Charlie Hales has been courageous. Of course, that's not a popular sentiment on either the left or the right. Still, it's true. Things are moving on the housing front. Partially that's the reality of the climate we're in, partially that's having a bold city council right now that's delivering on housing policies that should have been set long ago.

So, what do we do today? Do we need more shelters?

No, we do not. We need to maintain the shelters we have, but adding more shelters doesn't get us anywhere.

For one, shelters are expensive. Number two. I would bet the farm that the vast majority of people on the Springwater Corridor wouldn't access a shelter.

So, what do we need?

Housing. It's something we can all agree on.

But, Israel, what about tomorrow? What about the Springwater Corridor?

First, we need to increase organized camping. Sounds crazy right? It is. But it's the only way to maintain order in a growing crisis of people sleeping on our streets.

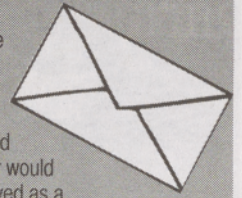
Second, if you're going to clear out folks on the Springwater you should do it surgically. If there are bad actors, get them out of there. If people are having an environmental impact, give them an ultimatum. Clean your camps up or be swept.

Outside of that, dispersing hundreds of people into the city is absolutely ridiculous, inhumane and won't actually solve anyone's problem. It certainly won't help people on the road to recovery or being able to access housing.

At the end of the day, regardless of which side of this debate you find yourself on, we can all agree we need more affordable housing and we need it now. This isn't a black and white issue. It's complex and constantly changing. Vote yes in November on the affordable housing bond. Be safe, but be compassionate. We're all walking on this long path together.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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