

# Aggressive sweeps undercut good intentions

People tell me all the time, Israel – all my friends, even the liberal ones are tired of it. The homeless. The trash. Something has to be done to clear these camps out.

I have to pause and ask out loud, “So what you are telling me is that you’re disgusted with Donald Trump’s politics, proud that we are a sanctuary city, that you’re trying to be intentional about racism and equity, that you’re proud that you only buy organic

meat and/or veggies, but that homeless people and trash are ruining our beautiful city. You kind of support the police sweeping the homeless out of the city, a city that has little to no housing for the poor.”

Sorry, but that’s simply unacceptable.

Everyone is quick to blame

former Mayor Charlie Hales for a liberal camping policy on homelessness that allowed people to erect tents throughout the city.

It’s not that simple.

I’ve written many times about the changing demographics in Portland – why city parks, neighborhoods and freeway underpasses have become a last refuge for people on the streets. In short, there’s simply no physical space in Portland for people experiencing homelessness.

The current mayor is saying that every homeless person in Portland should have an emergency shelter bed. That’s a nice aspiration, but one that is both expensive and time consuming. We shall see.

In the meantime, the city is posturing with more investments in the upcoming budget to clean up the streets. It’s a noble aspiration and one I agree with wholeheartedly – if that means helping people on the streets maintain trash-free camps.

If that means sweeping homeless people, it’s doomed to fail and become a public relations nightmare down the road.

Mayor Tom Potter worked to create a workgroup that brought opposing sides together. It went sideways when both Street Roots and other advocates and the Portland Business Alliance got locked in a public relations battle over policies targeting people on the streets on sidewalks and in camps. Plus, the courts eventually ruled that sidewalk ordinances banning people from sitting or lying on a sidewalk are unconstitutional.

Mayor Sam Adams also worked to bring opposing sides of the issue together, but instead of making it a big process he basically told both advocates and the business community that either side wasn’t going to be happy. We weren’t going to spend our time fighting over 12 by 12 feet of sidewalk. It wasn’t perfect, but under Adams’ leadership he worked to begin the process of decriminalizing people on the streets. The goal was to message that camping wasn’t ideal, but that people had to have a place to be and worked to create low-barrier approaches to people camping outside.

Mayor Charlie Hales came into office and swept a homeless camp in front of City Hall, signaling a harsh approach to how the city was going to deal with campers. By the end of his tenure, he had more or less legalized camping in Portland, understanding that it was a humanitarian crisis and that Portland had no answer to rising rents and a nearly zero vacancy rate.

Mayor Ted Wheeler has told Street Roots time and again that he’s not going to criminalize the homeless. I want to believe him and have no reason not to.

Saying that, camp sweeps have increased dramatically. It’s unclear what the plan is moving forward.

Here’s a prediction of what will unfold if the city starts to move towards a more aggressive approach on

people experiencing homelessness in public spaces.

City officials will ask the city attorney to advise them on what is possible and what is not. What laws exist to confront large camps, people experiencing homelessness on sidewalks and any other tools police can use to move people out of target locations?

The city attorney will advise city officials on current legislation, past lawsuits and their findings and what’s been effective in the past. They will come up with a new path forward.

There will be a two-fold strategy – one involving multiple government jurisdictions and one involving private security agencies. People experiencing homelessness will begin to get moved around.

Government agencies will begin to target specific locations downtown and around the city. Homeless people will begin to be displaced from one location to another.

At the same time this is going on, a public relations campaign will be broadcast to the general public saying that there’s a public health and safety crisis and the streets have to be cleaned up.

Never mind the fact that being homelessness itself is actually a public health and safety crisis for people on the streets.

Angry neighbors and the business community will cheer at first, but then realize that the strategy doesn’t actually work. They will ask for more when they don’t see a visible change in street homelessness citywide.

Any negative interaction between the homeless and the general public will be highlighted as an example of why it’s necessary to have law and order.

Partnerships will be tested. Organizations and homeless advocates defending the rights of people on the streets will be forced to choose between trying to thread the needle and working with groups to continue to maintain political will to end people’s homelessness and be actively protesting and speaking out against the criminalization of the homeless.

Lawsuit after lawsuit will be presented by civil rights attorneys claiming that people experiencing homelessness don’t have an alternative to sleeping on the streets – which is true. Attorneys will have a good case.

The media will have a field day with all of the activity. People experiencing homelessness will have a field day.

It’s a cycle of madness that has been repeated over and over for the past 40 years in American cities – especially on the West Coast.

Here’s the thing, Portland. This city is full of good intentions around homelessness. I don’t think for a moment that city officials or the general public doesn’t want to see people find housing.

Unfortunately, we don’t have the resources to scale up to solve the problem.

Saying that, I like to remind people that the climate today has the potential to be much worse. We shall see where we stand after state and federal cuts to important safety-net programs for people in poverty.

What to do?

In the short-term, civil rights groups are already working on a possibly ordinance that more or less says there shouldn’t be any kind of displacement in camps or on the streets without guaranteed housing.

Civil rights attorneys are perking their heads up – hoping that we don’t return to an era when suing the city for criminalizing the homeless was commonplace.

Street Roots and other advocates are waiting to see what the strategy is going to be.

We are still cautiously optimistic that we aren’t headed back to sweeping homeless people without any alternative to housing. It’s an approach that was created in Reagan’s era of crime and punishment and lasted now for 40 years. It’s time to turn the page.



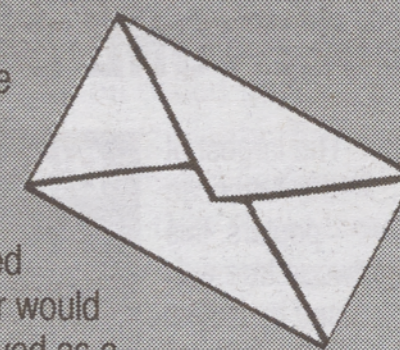
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By Israel Bayer

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