



SLEEPLESS IN EUGENE

Former butterfly lot protest campers move to new county-owned site off Highway 99 as a City Hall site progresses

At its Oct. 22 work session, Eugene City Council decided to create a temporary homeless shelter at the vacant former City Hall site at Eighth Avenue and Pearl Street. This decision came after a homeless protest camp formed around the butterfly parking lot structure, across Oak Street from the Lane County Courthouse.

That camp has now mostly dispersed, the bulk of it moving to a new location near Highway 99 and Roosevelt Boulevard after Lane County stepped up to work with the unhoused campers. That county-owned campsite, with room for 70 spaces, was announced Saturday, Oct. 27, with only a few lingering campers staying near the courthouse as of Oct. 30.

The city's planned camp downtown has not yet been set up. It will take up a portion of the former City Hall lot and will include a day center and dusk-to-dawn sleeping area (including three large tents with cots); it will house 38 people to start, with potential for expansion.

The camp is scheduled to be up and running within the next few weeks.

During the work session, City Manager Jon Ruiz said the decision to create the temporary City Hall lot shelter site was not in response to that butterfly lot protest camp, "but rather following weeks of careful and thoughtful consideration of a number of potential sites in the greater downtown."

But a local homeless advocate doesn't buy Ruiz's claims. Some campers who were living at the butterfly lot say they were not certain about moving to the City Hall lot anyway, citing a lack of discourse with the city surrounding what the homeless community actually needs.

Lynn Porter, 78, has dedicated his retirement to being an advocate and activist for the Eugene homeless community for the past seven years. He says the new temporary downtown shelter is a good step, but doubts the validity of

Ruiz's comment that the protest camp had nothing to do with the decision.

"I think they're only doing it under pressure," Porter says. "Pressure from the Ninth Circuit Court decision and the camp."

He adds: "I'm really pleased that it's happening and it's been a long road to get there, but I don't think it would've happened without pressure from a lot of activists."

The protest camp formed shortly after the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that it's unconstitutional to prevent people from sleeping in public spaces without offering a viable alternative.

Lane County has respected that ruling — not taking action on houseless people camping on the butterfly lot (a county-owned site), while the city of Eugene continued to issue fines through ticketing, an action they say does not violate the ruling since they are not jailing or forcibly removing anyone.

Porter calls Eric Jackson the "public face" of that former protest camp.

Jackson, 52, began camping at the butterfly lot about two months ago. He recently moved to the new county-owned spot off of Highway 99.

He says when news broke of the Ninth Circuit case, and people heard about "the county not doing anything," numbers grew at the butterfly lot camp overnight. As of late last week, about 100 people were camped there, Jackson says.

Jackson says in regards to the forthcoming City Hall lot temporary shelter site: "I think it's fantastic. Thirty-eight people won't freeze or get frostbite. Thirty-eight is a great start."

But, before the move to the county-owned site, he says, the people of the protest camp weren't necessarily looking to move to the City Hall site.

"We'll stand in line and see how many people they let in, but there's 100 here plus," he says. "If we can't move in, then we can't move in."

He says the biggest thing the city can do, besides providing more affordable housing, is communicating with the homeless community.

"Why don't you go ask your homeless people what your homeless people need? Like, talk to the 1,500 people," he says. "Send somebody that's in your staff to interact with 1,500 people. That's my graduating high school class. I think the vice principal knew us all."

Jackson says the new county space off Highway 99, where he and other butterfly lot campers are now living, is a good alternative. He says there has also been communication about what campers need between he and the county.

"I was offered the space and the county is providing me what is needed to date," Jackson says. "We still have a few more days for set up to get power, phone and kitchen going."

He says he hopes for the county site to be run with some of his ideas through a program he envisions, which he calls "Eugene Transitions Junction."

"I said 'yes' when I saw the potential of Eugene Transitions Junction, which is my operation and rules. It is to provide safe storage via camera, safe and stable REM sleep and a place for me to help others achieve their goals," he says. "You must be able to articulate your goal in order to stay longer term, and trash cleanliness is a must along with low drama."

Lane County's Public Information Officer Devon Ashbridge announced the opening of the Highway 99 county-owned site via press release on Saturday, Oct. 27. Ashbridge says, as of Tuesday, Oct. 30, the camp is at capacity. "Yesterday [Monday] there were about 100 people in 70 spaces," she says.

In the release, she says, the county designated that site due to "[g]rowing concerns regarding health and safety, as well as concerns from community members who are unable to access critical public services located downtown and the growing impact on downtown property owners."

She tells *Eugene Weekly* via email: "We do believe that providing the alternate site allows us to manage the butterfly lot more closely."

But, she says, there was no force from the county and the butterfly lot campers moved to the county site voluntarily. "Our primary goal is still voluntary compliance with the few remaining individuals on the butterfly lot property. We will continue to work within the law to manage our downtown properties."

As for others who lived on the butterfly lot with Jackson last week, there were similar thoughts on the new temporary downtown City Hall lot shelter — a capacity of 38 is a start, but the site won't meet everyone's needs.

"I have positive thoughts and apprehensions," says Elijah Davis, a former butterfly lot camper and a human rights activist. "The positives are, 'Yay! There is going to be a safe and legal place to rest and get enough sleep to rejuvenate ourselves.' That is a struggle I've been fighting for since 2012."

He continues: "But, on the other hand, the fact that they're going to do three tents with cots for a person like me, who is agoraphobic — I'm not going to choose to go there because I won't be able to have my own space and feel safe. I'll still seek other solutions."

Another camper, Alex Ghenatos, has similarly mixed feelings. "I like that it's located downtown, because all of the resources are downtown," Ghenatos says. "That's always a good thing."

But, Ghenatos agrees with Jackson about the missing communication piece.

"I just think the number one thing is education. Education and information between the housed and the homeless, because that's the key to everything right there," he says. "The perspective of one side to another side can really get in the way sometimes and once that barrier's broken I think that people will understand that these are just people. They really are."

There is not an update on when exactly the downtown day center and dusk-to-dawn sleeping area will open, says Laura Hammond, community relations director with the city of Eugene. But, she says, the city is hoping to get it "up and running as soon as possible, hopefully within the next several weeks." ■