

Camps: Some people have lived in the woods for several years

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But there's another issue: The camps aren't technically illegal.

After receiving a record number of complaints about homeless camps, especially in wooded areas on the east end of Astoria and behind Columbia Memorial Hospital, police hiked in and tagged the sites they found with 24-hour cleanup notices. The notices have remained in place for over a week now. Police Chief Geoff Spalding, who went out to see the camps for himself on Friday, wanted more input on the best way to handle the situation.

Now a deeper analysis of Astoria's code prohibiting overnight camping has revealed one major omission.

While the city's ordinance prohibits people from camping in tents or vehicles in public parks, public rights of way, public and private parking lots and along the waterfront, it is silent about camping on city-owned land generally — land like the city-owned woods, where more than 10 camps branch off from a network of makeshift trails.

City Manager Brett Estes met Tuesday with Spalding, public works staff and City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard to discuss how the city should address the camps and informed City Council of the situation at a meeting Tuesday night. In addition to kicking the discussion over to the homelessness solutions task force, city councilors also agreed staff should begin drafting a code amendment to make camping illegal on all city property. They believe the code was intended to address camping citywide.

City Councilor Cindy Price asked that the city talk to county officials about possibly establishing a camping spot or tiny home-type village near a bus line. It's not an idea she necessarily likes, but it is one other people in Astoria have suggested to LaMear. And Price brought up a point that has also troubled police: If you move people, where do they go?



Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding documents homeless camps on city-owned property Friday.

Katie Frankowicz/The Daily Astorian

At least one man told police bluntly that if they make him take down his camp — a tidy, organized site — he doesn't have housing options in town and he'll likely just move deeper into the woods.

Without an established site for people to stay, Price said the city will just move people around "on an endless chess board."

Larger problem

Like other cities across the United States, Astoria is seeing a spike in homelessness coupled with a lack of options when it comes to resources such as mental health treatment and affordable housing.

In August, law enforcement in Clatsop County went only two days without receiving a call or initiating a call about a homeless camp or someone camping in a car. Most days, there were several calls. Hired security

and neighbors of Columbia Memorial Hospital frequently report possible camps or suspicious comings and goings near hospital buildings.

A large camp behind Goodwill in Warrenton is coming under police scrutiny, as well. The camp has been there for years, and includes a number of temporary structures such as tents, clotheslines and tables. Warrenton police began issuing eviction notices last week, but plan to give people still living there a couple of weeks to leave.

"Nobody wants to move these individuals out of this area," Spalding said of the Astoria camps. Police want to do the right thing and take "a humane approach," by moving slowly, involving social services and looking for ways to transition people to different housing arrangements.

"We are not talking about arresting anybody, we are

not talking about issuing citations," Spalding added. "We're simply talking about removing the encampments from the city property for a variety of reasons — some of them include fire hazards, public health and safety issues in terms of needles and trash and human feces."

Organized camps

Some of the camps police found in Astoria in August are little more than abandoned trash heaps and buried wooden pallets, a difficult undertaking for city crews to clean up. Mixed in with cardboard containers, plastic, clothes and other detritus can be used needles, moldering food and human waste.

Other camps are much tidier, occupied by people who only want a place to stay

and who are scrupulous in how their camp is ordered. In one camp — a sort of village in its level of organization — ropes acted as low fences, marking pathways through a network of tents. Recently washed clothes hung from clotheslines. There were designated garbage areas. Designated bathrooms. Small art installations.

"We want to be sensitive to this and not just displace human beings," Spalding said.

Most of the camps police encountered this summer are out of sight and out of mind. But police have received complaints about suspicious behavior and have found some evidence of criminal activity. At one camp, they found a tricycle that had been stolen from another homeless man. The thieves hauled the trike

into the woods and spray-painted it pink. The police took it back and returned it to its owner.

Ideally, people would voluntarily clean up their camps. The offenses they're guilty of are low level and the police aren't interested in making arrests. But if camping continues, the messes left behind could go beyond the city's resources to clean up.

Many of the people who live in the woods and who The Daily Astorian approached with questions did not want to talk about their camps. They had worked hard over the spring and summer months to get ready for winter. They were nervous about losing this stability.

Kenny Hansen, the Astoria Police Department's homeless liaison officer, estimates he knows 9 out of every 10 people camping in the woods. When he went out to survey camps with Spalding on Friday, he called out the names of the people who lived there as he approached their tents.

"Hello! It's Kenny," he called each time.

He stopped to talk to one couple outside of their tent and asked about people they all knew, several of them camping somewhere nearby. He asked the couple what the city could do to help them.

"Halfway housing," they replied. A place where maybe they would be charged only half of typical rental costs. Even with a job, it is nearly impossible to afford rent, they said.

If they can't afford the rent or even the move-in costs of traditional apartments, or are placed on a waiting list for low-income housing, their options for housing in town are almost nonexistent. Some people have lived in the woods for several years, weathering winter storms and heavy rains.

"There's a charm to it," said one man.

Yes, his companion agreed, then added: "But there's some days you just hate it."

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PUBLIC MEETING

Please join us to discuss preliminary design options for the **Astoria Scandinavian Heritage Park**
Tues. Sept. 11th • 6:30 - 8:00 pm
at the Clatsop Community College Towler Hall Room 310
ADA Accessible ♿

West Studio, the landscape architects will give an interactive presentation and then you will have the opportunity to provide important feedback that will help us shape the final design
Light refreshments will be provided

For more information
visit: www.astoriascanpark.org
email: clatsop41@yahoo.com
call: 503-791-9156

The park is located at the gateway to Historic Downtown Astoria, its boundaries are 15th & 16th street, Marine Drive and the waterfront trolley tracks. Construction of the **Astoria Scandinavian Heritage Park** will be funded by donations and grants. Not your tax dollars.