



## Staff Report

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**TO:** Mayor and City Council

**THROUGH:** Steve Powers, City Manager

**FROM:** Gretchen Bennett, Unsheltered Liaison

### **SUBJECT:**

Sheltering in Cascades Gateway Park and Wallace Marine Park

Ward(s): All Wards

Councilor(s): All Councilors

Neighborhood(s): All Neighborhoods

Result Area(s): Natural Environment Stewardship; Safe Community; Safe, Welcoming and Livable Community.

### **ISSUE:**

How can the City Council safely reinstate camping restriction at Cascades Gateway Park and Wallace Marine Park?

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Information Only

### **SUMMARY:**

A preliminary plan to end camping at the undeveloped portions of Cascades Gateway Park and Wallace Marine Park is outlined in Attachment One to this staff report. COVID-19 has highlighted the region's shelter deficiencies. Ending camping today risks Covid-19 transmission and unsafe public-right-of-way camping. The preliminary plan's key elements include preventing Covid-19 transmission, opening sheltering options, and communicating respectfully. We will work with partners to develop solutions and implement the safe end of camping at the parks.

### **FACTS AND FINDINGS:**

Swift City action in March 2020 to provide park acreage for sheltering facilitated Covid-19 prevention. City parks are not intended for human habitation, and camping in these locations is unsustainable.

The City, non-profit agencies, and volunteer have worked together to remove garbage, address criminal activity, and establish small, managed alternatives to sheltering in the parks. Community partners estimate between 200-300 persons staying at any given time at each park.

The City has several initiatives underway that, over time, will reduce the need for sheltering in unsuitable locations. The Housing Rental Assistance Program, the Urban Renewal Agency's acquisition of properties for use by non-profit agencies for sheltering and services, the Salem Housing Authority's Redwood Crossings, and the Safe Park program are examples. The over 3,000 housing vouchers, public housing apartments, and support programs provided by the Salem Housing Authority are decades-old commitments to housing our neighbors. The City is a partner in the Mid-Willamette Valley Homelessness Alliance and works regionally to advance shared vision and goals to reduce homelessness.

While the overall work to reduce homelessness must continue, the City needs a focused plan to assist unsheltered homeless persons and to not have City parks and sidewalks be shelters. On any given night in Salem there are approximately 5-35 open shelter beds (sometimes more and sometimes less). After shelters and vehicle safe park programs fill, over a thousand are estimated to be outside. Our region's Coordinated Entry Data System and Homeless Management Information System report issues and demographics for persons sheltering at Cascades, Wallace, and the I-5/Market Street camp in December 2020. Please see Attachment Two for this information.

Persons sheltering in the parks, on sidewalks, and on state rights of way are the hardest to help of the region's unhoused residents. They need on-site supportive housing (permanent supportive housing), behavioral health services, low-barrier shelters that accommodate pets and couples and provide cultural/identity specific services. Identification verification, communication assistance, and the ability to stay connected with service providers are all acute needs.

Campers report they would return to downtown sidewalks, awnings or other parks if the camping restriction was reinstated prior to the development of alternatives. The City currently has limited ability to require people to leave unsuitable shelter locations. Due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19, counties are not lodging individuals arrested for minor, repeat offenses, including trespass.

Sometimes successfully leaving the streets, or parks, begins with one key step. One neighbor staying at Wallace Marine Park shared she can access housing only when she has a state-issued identification card. She aches to get out of the park, into housing and employment, and is hindered without proper identification. Service providers report offices closed to the public and repeated unsuccessful online submissions.

One person staying at Cascades Gateway Park has a Section 8 voucher and has been unable to find an apartment open to rent despite assistance from nonprofit staff.

Some unsheltered residents have pets or companions and cannot locate a shelter or housing solution that accommodates the need to stay together. Others have significant trauma background and will not quickly access indoor, managed options. For example, one person shared a background of abuse

and did not trust the safety protocols at indoor congregate shelters, preferring the independent life of outdoor movement and camping.

Compelling people to access treatment, take prescribed medications, or follow provider advice is only rarely an option. Family, law enforcement, and service providers lack authority to compel treatment cooperation.

**BACKGROUND:**

in March 2020 the City Council adopted the COVID emergency declaration opening undeveloped areas of the two parks to limited camping and most recently extended that exception until June 1, 2021.

Gretchen Bennett  
Liaison, Unsheltered Residents and  
Homelessness, Human Rights and  
Federal Compliance Manager

**Attachments:**

1. Safe Park Camping Unwind Plan
2. Outreach Data