

**WHATCOM COUNTY
EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE**
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Satpal Singh Sidhu
County Executive

MEMO

Date: February 2, 2021
To: Whatcom County Council
From: County Executive Satpal Sidhu
RE: Reflections on Camp 210
CC:
City of Bellingham Council
Mayor Seth Fleetwood
All Small City Mayors

The emergence of the protest encampment at City Hall, the exhaustive efforts to amicably resolve the situation and then the sudden cleanup of the encampment all raise difficult questions. I've heard a lot of outrage and blame being tossed around, including at myself. I appreciate and accept that this comes with being the County Executive.

I'd like to suggest that we all take a step back, consider the broader picture and look for opportunities for positive change and reflect on possible lessons we can apply. I think we all share a desire to improve our future actions and approaches as it relates to how we address homelessness and our housing situation. However, before we can get to that, we need to share a common understanding of the facts.

I appreciate the email letter from Mr. Brel Froebe and Homeless Advocate / 'collective' showcasing their perspective of the Camp 210. I believe there is more to this than this limited one-sided portrayal. The Council members and the community deserve to know all the facts to have a more informed discussion on this serious topic. First here is the summary of current status of "shelter bed capacity in Whatcom County".

2019-20 Winter Season

280* Shelter Beds
35 Civic Field Beds
20 Youth Beds
33 motel vouchers COB
14 motel vouchers WCHD

2020-21 Winter Season

330 Shelter Beds
5 new beds at YWCA
4 motel rooms for Lydia Place
39 overflow beds (CTK/LMM)
48 motel vouchers COB
96 motel vouchers WCHD
522 total beds for the winter

Actions Taken

Base Camp- 50 more beds added.
Year-round funding dedicated to YWCA and Lydia Place.
City and County winter motel funds increased.

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Homelessness is not a making of policies or workings of the local city (including small cities) or the county. This has been the result of macro-economic policies at the highest levels of our government. It is the result of half a century of mis-placed priorities by both Democrats and Republicans. So, when it comes to the instant solutions, the only visible elected people are local governments. Which is fair! However, this is a regional, state, and national issue not just a Bellingham's issue to solve.

May I remind everyone that 'advocates' are not the only people, who care about the homeless population in our county. The Homeless Strategies Workgroup was started in 2018. City and County has been making annual investments of millions of dollars to house the low income and homeless people in our community. It is out of sight that how many people are not on the street, because of these continuous efforts. Yes, I agree, this is not enough, and our nation and our society can do more!

Coming back to current issue of Camp 210. Since mid-November both City and County Admin have been in dialogue with the 'collective'. It was presented to the "collective" that there are two issues at hand: one is short term severe weather sheltering and second is longer term steps to lessen homelessness. So why don't we discuss the immediate issue of severe weather separately from housing every homeless person. The answer from the collective was something like to the effect "all or nothing". The demand was something like: if you give someone a motel voucher, then that person must be guaranteed a tiny house when the person leaves the motel, or something like City / County shall have 1100 tiny homes placed before "we leave" camp 210. This ownership of "we leave" the camp 210 is more of a threat than an amicable dialogue to reach a solution. It smacks of using the plight of these needy citizens as a negotiation tool. The people at Camp 210 were given the impression that if you stay here, we can get you a tiny house. The priority of the 'collective' has not been to get them to a warm place!

Yes, I agree that PROTEST is an acceptable way to showcase the problems of the citizens to their elected leaders. And this protest was well received and shown due respect. Somehow this respect was abused to push the local leaders with unclear demands. At the beginning, the rhetoric from the advocates was to buy 50 shelters. When asked: How would the 50 shelters solve the issue of severe weather sheltering, when there is no ready place to deploy them and no credible operator is available? There was no coherent answer. City had already issued and RFP to find a credible operating agency.

The County Council authorized the purchase of 50 Tiny homes, which were purchased and 25 were deployed as Swift Haven managed by HomesNow! The Mayor proposed the 'collective' to start with next 25 shelters at Cornwall as low barrier shelter and City would be willing to order additional 25 new shelters. Mayor gave a personal tour of the Cornwall site to Brel Froebe, which was rejected as 'not enough and unacceptable'. The demand changed to no-barrier shelter.

'Collective' members and other advocates never had the clarity of what they are trying to achieve. They brought up the Whatcom Human Right Task Force, a well-respected organization for last several decades in Whatcom County, as their sponsors, without having well thought out plan, research, and clear understanding with WHRTF Board. This wasted 4 weeks of discussions, when the WHRTF Board declined to support the inept proposal by 'collective'. It was also prompted by 'collective' that City is putting

hurdles and unreasonable demands on them. If you go back two years, the same discussions were held with HomesNow! organization with same stipulations. HomesNow! grasped the reality and got to work. Today they have earned a status of a credible advocates of homeless people. Just to let everyone know that there was no lack of engagement with 'collective' from City and County.

The unscrupulous campaign to discredit the services at Base Camp by protesters and advocates does not help their cause. There are very dedicated and compassionate community members and volunteers, who take pride in providing a safe haven from the dangers of sleeping on the streets, not only in severe weather but throughout the year for past 100 years. There is no need for 'us versus them' to address this issue.

The question of NO BARRIER shelter, an environment free of rules and responsibilities, must also be discussed by both Councils and the whole community before investment of tax dollars. This unregulated environment had some serious consequences. Failure to abide by social distancing guidelines led to a COVID outbreak at the camp 210, which prompted Base Camp to temporarily place restrictions on new guests. Members of the Health Department's COVID testing team were harassed and threatened. When campers exposed to COVID-19 were provided access to the County's isolation and quarantine facility on Byron Avenue, there were repeated violations of the public health rules established for that facility.

Then came the tactics of inviting outside extremists to put pressure on City government. None of the campers at 210 participated in these shenanigans. Everyone homeless person deplored this action. The 'collective' must bear their part of responsibility of vandalism and desecrating the National flag, hindering the use of City and County offices by the employees and the public, safe walking of employees to and from their vehicles, fights at the camp, harassment of social workers from Opportunity Council, the COVID-19 testing team and abuses at the Isolation and quarantine facility.

Numerous incidents at the encampment were reported to the Bellingham Police, including disorderly conduct, felony assault, sexual assault, illicit drug use and harassment. Some of the more notable incidents include an arson and subsequent propane tank explosion and a hatchet attack by a camper that sent some young men to the emergency room.

About the disaster shelter comparison: People in distress take the shelters and help at the difficult times of natural disasters. There is an element of cooperation in handling moments of crisis. In the current case, the demands were of choices and personal likings, not what is feasible. It was about 'Protest' of political pressure and about winners and losers instead of helping the needy. The term dehumanization works both ways!

About the presence of police in full gear: The police were NOT present to evacuate the homeless. They were deployed to respond to the outside extremists, which were invited by 'collective' for a big demonstration on Friday. I think Mayor and his team were incredibly wise to avoid any such confrontation and mayhem by choosing Thursday instead of Friday. As a matter of fact, the 'collective' shall bear the responsibility for the presence of police and all the precautions authorities were forced to take.

I would reiterate to Whatcom County community and the Council Members that:

- We need to have a dialogue of cooperation and build upon what is already underway.
- Both Councils, Mayor and I to continue the engagement with community and homeless advocates to take steps for long lasting solutions over time to the issues of behavioral health & drug rehabilitation, shelters and more.
- Increase the viable options with investment in additional shelter options for severe weather and long-term temporary housing options.
- Use the existing capabilities to its full extent.
- Participation of Faith Based organizations as solution to this issue.
- Showcase the existing code of conduct at facilities supported by public tax dollars.
- Expand the means to increase the availability of trained and accredited service providers, social workers, case managers and shelter operators.
- Explore the programs from other jurisdictions the local government can support to address the contributing causes of homelessness—mental illness and addiction.
- Establish appropriate level of service that reflects our community values without becoming a magnet for the unsheltered individuals from across the region.

City and County Councils have limited resources to tackle the open-ended demands. We must engage with a goal to work together without violence and threats, but finding solutions, which can be implemented for the good of all citizens. We are ready for this dialogue!