

Dear Councillors and Mayor,

I am writing today because I am very disturbed by the recently proposed Public Space Use By-law. This by-law essentially criminalizes encampments, giving people living in them no place to go, no place to store their limited belongings and making their lives more precarious.

I was a frequent shopper in the downtown area throughout my teenage years- my friends and I roamed the streets with the money from our first jobs in hand, stopping at The Common for coffee, Eric's for a gateau basque, then Blush to look at the ethereal offerings and Kennedy Park to buy our best pair of jeans yet. Never once did the folks sitting on the ground with dirty clothes deter us from our routine. In fact, what stood out to me, at least, was the massive disparity between our experience of the downtown and theirs. Ours was so, so much more enjoyable.

I am opposed to all criminalization of encampments and fully support encampments in all public spaces until such time that permanent and safe solutions can be found for every person living in encampments.

I also support creative, short-term options like A Better Tent City in Waterloo, or creating a designated, resourced, downtown space for encampments (like a level of the Wilson St Parkade, for example) as a temporary solution.

It's not just a lack of shelter beds that is the problem. For many, the shelter system is not safe and people avoid them because of this. You can not solve the problem of encampments by making them against by-laws. This does nothing to address the root cause.

I understand that the City does not control funding for social housing, but there are many things that you can do to increase housing supply and increase affordable housing and yet there is no vacancy tax, you continue to allow short-term rental properties and continue to allow the financialization of the real estate market in Guelph. All of these things drive up rental prices and push more people into precarious situations. Additionally, there is no by-law on new developments needing to have enough affordable units (for people on social assistance or living below the poverty line) to address the problem.

Please stop saying that "your hands are tied" when there are so many things that your council could be doing but is not.

It is horrifying to me that you care more about Guelph's "image" than the people who live here. The people living in encampments are members of the Guelph community and you represent them too. It is your duty to ensure that they, too, have a positive experience of Guelph -- not one that is more criminalized and unsafe than ever.

I urge you to reject the Public Space Use by-law and allow encampments in public spaces until all people living in them have safe and permanent housing solutions.

I also urge you to use all tools at your disposal to address the housing crisis. The excuse that there's "nothing you can do" is untrue and lacks the creative vision and urgency needed for this crisis. Instead of attacking an already marginalized community with by-laws, use the tools you have to increase housing options in the City.

Thank you,

Ella