

Dear Councillors and Mayor Guthrie,

My name is Lisa Baird and I've been blessed to be a small business owner in downtown Guelph for over 10 years, first as a tenant in the Guelph Community Health Centre and now in the Norfolk Medical Building.

I am deeply alarmed by the proposed Public Space Use By-law, as it essentially criminalises encampments, leaving the people who live there with no place to go and no place to store their belongings. If this by-law is passed, it will make many people's lives even more precarious.

I fully support encampments in all public spaces until everyone has safe and stable housing. I am particularly in support of encampments in downtown Guelph, as downtown Guelph contains the daily social, medical and crisis supports people need, as well as warming centres and food. Moving people who are unhoused away from these supports would isolate them and put them at greater risk of harm such as death by drug poisoning, or hypothermia.

Let's remember that a superior court judge in Waterloo struck down that region's encampment bylaw last year, concluding that it violated people's Charter rights. The judge made a precedent-setting ruling that anti-encampment bylaws were unlawful because, given the lack of shelter beds there, unhoused people need tents to protect them from risk of serious harm.

Guelph's shelter system is similarly inadequate. People line up every day for two hours in advance for a place to sleep indoors. So we know that trying to pass and enforce this bylaw will likely result in the City spending money on losing lawsuits. Please don't waste our tax dollars in this way.

I see the housing crisis both as an emergency, and as a municipal responsibility to be addressed by the City, not just underfunded charities and health organisations.

We all know that the City does not control funding for social housing, but there are other things that can be done to increase housing supply and increase affordable housing. Why don't we have a steep tax on vacant residential properties? Why do we allow short-term rental properties? Why do we allow for-profit corporations to buy residential property? Why is there no by-law on new developments requiring the inclusion of affordable units, for people on social assistance or living below the poverty line, to address the problem?

*Why* do some of you say "Our hands are tied, there's nothing we can do" when that is clearly not the case?

I know that some people are upset by what they see as disruptive and disturbing behaviours in downtown Guelph. I would like to see this addressed by getting people's basic human needs met. Getting people what they need in order to be ok will reduce crime and ease the burden on Emergency and health care systems.

If you're worried about fires from propane, allow people to plug in electric heaters. If you're concerned about human waste, get some Porta Potties. These are just two obvious suggestions. I'm sure if you were to accept feedback and input from people who have lived or living experience of being unhoused, as well as people at local organisations including Sanguen, Guelph CHC, ARCH, Royal City Mission and Wellington-Dufferin Drug Strategy, you'd receive a wealth of practical suggestions for improving the safety and wellbeing of everyone downtown.

People who are unhoused are part of our community. They belong in downtown Guelph just as much as white middle-class business owners like me.

Sincerely,

Lisa Baird