

Public Space Bylaw City Council Meeting-
Wednesday, August 28th, 2024

Dear City of Guelph Staff, Mayor Cam Guthrie, and City Council,

My name is Katherine Nixon. With a background in social service work, I am a harm reduction advocate and worker, as well as a longstanding volunteer within our downtown community. For the past five years, I have been actively involved with Your Downtown Guelph Friends, a grassroots, youth-led organization that provides essential support to those in need. Our dedication to understanding and addressing the diverse needs of our residents drives us to advocate for cultural sensitivity and inclusion in all community services. I am writing today to express my commitment to working collaboratively to foster a more empathetic and supportive environment for everyone in our city.

As we discuss the proposed criminalization of homelessness, it is vital to recognize the human stories behind these policies. Homelessness is not a crime but rather a symptom of broader systemic issues, such as the lack of affordable housing, mental health challenges, and economic disparity. Criminalizing homelessness displaces individuals from their temporary shelters and perpetuates cycles of poverty and dehumanization. We have the opportunity to choose compassion over coercion and empathy over enforcement. Our collective efforts should focus on uplifting and supporting all community members, regardless of their housing status. Let us build a city where everyone has a place to call home and access to the resources they need to thrive.

The individuals living in tents within our community are not mere statistics or inconveniences to be ignored. They are human beings who have fallen on hard times and face circumstances beyond their control. It is crucial that we recognize their humanity and show compassion towards their situation. Providing basic necessities such as shelter, food, and healthcare is not only a moral obligation but also a

reflection of our shared humanity. As a society, we must come together to support those in need, extend a helping hand, and work towards solutions that address the root causes of homelessness.

Evicting tents is a harsh measure that only serves to further marginalize vulnerable populations. Such actions can be seen as a form of collective punishment, which is both unjust and a violation of international human rights standards.

The lack of adequate housing options in Guelph has left many individuals with no choice but to live in tents. Criminalizing or evicting them violates their basic human dignity. Our focus should be on addressing the urgent needs of those living with precarious housing status, rather than merely planning future housing projects. People are being turned away from shelters due to lack of space, and there has been no increase in beds to accommodate them. The recent sale of the 90 Carden building, the absence of rent caps, and the lack of harm reduction-based services present significant challenges. Urgent action is needed to address these issues and provide adequate support.

The housing crisis is at a critical juncture, and instead of uniting to address our collective responsibilities, we are opting for nimbyism, marginalization, and outright hostility. This approach only perpetuates suffering and isolation. It is imperative that we show our humanity through compassion, empathy, and proactive action. We need our politicians and stakeholders to prioritize policies that tackle the root causes of homelessness and provide sustainable solutions for those in need.

Unhoused community members endure harsh temperatures, extreme health complications, and social isolation daily. They face adversity on a scale few can imagine. Without support structures, proper hygiene facilities, a place to rest, or comfort, their situation is dire. Compounding this with stigmatizing sentiments from the community and elected officials only adds to their suffering. This policy and structural failure is unacceptable. We are investing significant time and resources in creating measures that cause further harm rather than seeking solutions that address the issue at its core. Our neighbouring communities, such as Kitchener with its “Better Tent City” initiative and Hamilton with its ‘Warming Bus’ and anti-renoviction legislation, offer concrete examples of viable alternatives.

Guelph could adopt a mosaic of such initiatives, showcasing what a progressive and caring community can achieve. We should not be making headlines for condemning the victims of the housing crisis. Increased visibility of poverty does not correlate with greater danger or risk. Instead, understanding and empathy can help build a stronger, more cohesive community that supports all its members, regardless of their economic status.

I urge you to consider the human rights and moral implications of criminalizing homelessness and evicting those living in tents. Such actions amount to victim-blaming and disregard the struggles and vulnerability of our unhoused population. Instead of punishment, let us focus on solutions that address the root causes of homelessness and provide support and resources to those in need. Let compassion, empathy, and decency guide our decisions, creating a more inclusive and equitable community for all.

I write to you not as a voice of compromise but with unwavering conviction. Let us be the city that refuses to turn a blind eye to our most vulnerable, that dares to challenge the status quo, and that paves a new path of compassion and understanding. Passing a bylaw is merely a temporary fix to a deep societal wound. It is time for us to rise above expedient politics and bureaucracy and demonstrate the true measure of our humanity. Let us be remembered not for the rules we enforce but for the lives we uplift and the compassion we show in times of need. Together, we can create a legacy of unity and empathy that resonates beyond our city limits. The time for change is now, and it starts with each and every one of us.

Regards,

Katherine (Kate) Nixon, S.S.W.

Your Downtown Guelph Friends