

City of Guelph City Council Meeting December 11th, in support of Agenda item 4.2

(Letter to the Editor by Katie McNair, as posted in Guelph Today)

Homeless encampments have been a prominent and contentious issue over the past many years. Guelph has enacted restrictions on setting up tents and temporary structures, for example where and when they can be established. Premier Ford recently threw fire on the issue, suggesting that mayors around the province (members of the Big City Mayors Caucus) should ask his government to use the notwithstanding clause to enact legislation allowing cities to remove encampments, shielding them from legal challenges while violating the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Mayor Guthrie, notably without support from the rest of council, answered the call as one of 13 mayors to publicly ask the Ford government to do just that. The last time the Ford government used the notwithstanding clause to impose a contract on CUPE workers, there was major public backlash, including the threat of a general strike in the province. Under pressure, the government repealed the legislation.

Why does Premier Ford think this time will be different? I would wager he is hoping people don't care enough about the issue.

Having a good faith conversation about encampments is critical. Shelters across the province don't have enough beds to house every person in need, and there is a critical shortage of deeply affordable transitional and long-term housing. People live in encampments because they have no other options; in those cases where a shelter bed may be available, some find the environment unsafe and frightening.

I understand that people may feel uncomfortable or unsafe walking past homeless encampments, as well as individual homeless people on our streets. It can also be sad and painful to witness the tragedy of homelessness. We need to remind ourselves that if the province allows cities to dismantle and ban encampments, our homeless will have nowhere to go. People will either be forced to set up encampments far from city centres, without access to the services they need to not only survive, but to improve their situation, or to live alone and isolated on urban streets, increasing their risk of victimization and violence.

The proposed use of the notwithstanding clause is the Ford government saying one of two things - we don't care about the homeless and their human rights, or we have no humane solutions to help them. Given that housing and poverty experts and advocates point to the critical investments and services that can move the needle on this problem, it is hard not to conclude that Mr. Ford doesn't care to fix the problem, he simply wants to hide it. It is disappointing that Mayor Guthrie has chosen to send the same message. I don't want to live in that kind of community; do you?

Katie McNair