

WHATCOM COUNTY
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Satpal Singh

County

MEMO

Date: February 2, 2021
To: Whatcom County Council
From: County Executive Satpal Sidhu
RE: Reflections on Camp 210

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, misinformation 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, 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.

First, let's be sure we all have a realistic picture of Camp 210.

When the primary winter shelter in Whatcom County, Base Camp, approached capacity, homeless individuals were invited by advocates to set up at City Hall as part of an "occupation" protest to demand additional winter shelter capacity. When volunteers and donors began providing tents and food at the encampment, some of Base Camp's guests moved to the encampment, which provided an environment free of rules and responsibilities. The encampment was also free of Christian ministry, which is an optional but ever-present part of Lighthouse Mission Ministries.

This unregulated environment had some serious consequences. Failure to abide by social distancing guidelines led to a COVID outbreak among people moving between Base Camp and the camp, which prompted Base Camp to temporarily place restrictions on new guests. Members of the Health Department's COVID testing team were harassed and threatened during their xx onsite visits to test campers. 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.

Social workers from the Opportunity Council's Homeless Outreach Team were repeatedly harassed when attempting to connect with the homeless individuals at the camp. They no longer felt safe coming to the camp and discontinued providing their services at City Hall. City and County employees had similar negative experiences, as did emergency medical services providers and law enforcement.

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 several young men to the emergency room.

Unfortunately, there has been an unsubstantiated and unscrupulous smear campaign against Base Camp and Lighthouse Mission Ministries. Protesters at the camp have repeatedly and loudly claimed that Base Camp is not a safe place. That is simply not true. This strategy of bashing Base Camp and the Mission to advance the protesters' objectives is reprehensible. The shelter is operated by very dedicated and caring individuals who take pride in providing a safe haven from the dangers of sleeping on the streets. What we do know, however, from police and first-hand reports is that Camp 210 was perhaps the least safe place in the City of Bellingham by the time it ended.

Second, let's make sure we all are aware of recent efforts to create additional emergency winter shelter capacity. Advocates made a case for purchasing 50 individual shelter units for emergency winter sheltering. The County Council deliberated on this and unanimously decided to support such an action. As soon as the City of Bellingham was able to provide assurances that it would be able to deploy and operate sites for these units, I authorized their emergency purchase.

An agreement was reached with HomesNow! to operate half of these shelter units in the upper parking lot at Frank Geri Field and they were deployed there in early January, taking approximately 20 campers off the lawn at City Hall. The City of Bellingham held numerous discussions with encampment representatives who had expressed interest in being a potential operator of a tiny home encampment. Unfortunately, after negotiations prolonged by rhetoric and changes in spokespeople, the City's offer to create a second new 25-unit tiny home camp by identifying a location, purchasing 25 more tiny homes, and supporting it with funding, was rejected for being too little to accommodate everyone.

Recognizing the potential need for emergency winter shelter beds, Lighthouse Mission Ministries together with volunteers from CTK Church arranged to provide an additional 39 beds at the old Drop-In Center on Holly Street. In mid-January there were approximately 90-100 beds available, which would have accommodated all the unsheltered individuals at City Hall.

In late January, some campers at City Hall began to realize that the protesters' demands of a tiny home for every camper was not going to materialize. Approximately two dozen of the former campers have now transitioned back to Base Camp.

Third, we should recognize that the arrival of outside agitators made the involvement of law enforcement inevitable.

When the time came for creating the 25-foot safety zone around City Hall, the organizers of Camp 210 had the opportunity to demonstrate leadership. They could have recognized the City's need to improve safety. They could have recognized that Base Camp was a safer and more appropriate place for a large number of the campers. Instead they forced a showdown and claimed victimization.

In my view, the mayor was abundantly generous in providing opportunities for the protest organizers to achieve many of their goals, **including amplifying the very real needs and challenges faced by those living unsheltered in our community.**

However, what had begun as a violation of municipal code grew into hot spot for crime and then developed into a violent protest, led by agitators who defaced and broke into City Hall, assaulted and drove off journalists, and even harassed the chairman of HomesNOW! No one wanted a heavy law enforcement presence to be necessary to end the encampment. **But the lawlessness and public safety threat made this unavoidable, especially after it was learned that those with extremist views who use violence to amplify their voices were expected to join the fray. . And who put out the call up and down I-5 for extra protestors? Some members of the collective, who claimed to care about our homeless neighbors but whose reckless actions put them at further risk.**

I cannot agree with assertions that law enforcement should have somehow shown up less prepared or in fewer numbers to protect **campers**, City employees, County employees and the public. Every one of those men and women in uniform are members of our community, and they were ready to put themselves in harm's way. They were subjected **to** invective and hate speech but demonstrated great professionalism and restraint.

Where do **we** go now? What are our next steps? How do we heal the division? I think that there are a number of questions on which we need to reach consensus before making any big decisions. These are just a few that come to mind:

- How much are we willing to invest in new shelter options when there is existing capacity going unused?
- Is our community comfortable with having a faith-based organization operate our primary emergency winter shelter?

- What kinds of rules are needed at shelters to keep people safe while still being inclusive and supporting adult autonomy (different words)?
- How do we grow capacity for social workers, case management, shelter operators, mental health providers?
- How much responsibility can we place on the shoulders of local government to address the contributing causes of homelessness—mental illness and addiction?
- How do we provide an appropriate level of service that reflects our community values without becoming a magnet for the unsheltered individuals from across the region?

As I've said too many times before, perfect is the enemy of good. When it comes to dealing with homelessness and affordable housing I don't think we are even close to good yet. I am disappointed that the encampment ended in a manner that has pushed people further apart and less willing to consider facts and differing perspectives. However, I am hopeful that we will again recognize that we share core values and want action toward meaningful and workable solutions.