

November 18 meeting (overview notes, not comprehensive or verbatim)

Mayor, Peter, Janice

Aida, Herardo, Patricia, Lloyd, Markis

(Amy came in a couple times to help video record/live stream with phone, and eventually she stayed. We talked about videotaping and their belief that all discussions in Council chambers are videotaped, which they are not. Peter answers question about consent for recording under WA law, Aida states that we can expect meetings always to be recorded, Mayor doesn't object.) (we also used the microphones so we could hear each other better)

Mayor: thank you, broad discussion. We've continued working on this. We shared yesterday that we acknowledge there is a need for another site. I shared that the WCHD has weighed in, indicates present status needs to change with solution that moves people away from City Hall. Towards that end, we indicated a willingness to make a public site available for emergency sheltering.

Work being done at county regarding pallets, when they will be purchased and deployed. Questions about details should be directed to County. Being worked on.

Question of an operator with whom to enter agreements, to sign off on responsibility for managing site. Variety of reasons. On our property, we need to ensure there is someone we can communicate re: issues. You are the possible group who could become that group, in a coop model. State law approves that kind of structure.

Peter: Partners typically do that legwork.

Mayor: can we go over some basics that would apply to what happens now and probably future site.

Aida: (written statement, which she agreed to share, regarding the aims of their group and that different people have different future interests)

Mayor: is there overlap between the groups?

Aida: overlap is the advocates have unified around the common goal. All out there now exercising their first amendment rights.

Mayor: Can we reach some agreement on these things:

Mayor: Regarding Covid safety, can we agree that masks should be a requirement?

Markis: Yes, they already are. Agreement. Some it is hard to get them to wear them, different issue, they are required.

Mayor: Can we space tents for social distance? They are tightly packed.

Markis: Yes, we can turn tents and look further into that.

Lloyd: we'd like to distance, not enough space.

Mayor: (after conversation) we agree there needs to be distancing.

Markis: haven't had visit from WCHD yet.

Mayor: We can agree to leave direct, unimpeded access. City Hall not at capacity, but a lot of staff here. And we have members of the public who use it.

Markis: (didn't catch)

Mayor: what is appropriate language to refer to people camping? Answer: "the people of the community" they are regular community members just like the rest of us.

Mayor: there has been loud amplified music. If you have control of that, can you turn it down a bit?

(Community members sought details.)

Lloyd: we can't control everyone. Music gives us motivation. But yes we want to be respectful.

(Amy arrives and stays, sits in front of Mayor's table with camera/phone)

Mayor: how does it feel to have a camera in your face?

Lloyd: depends on who is holding the camera.

Mayor: no camping on the landscape areas. Practical issues like litter, etc.

Patricia: we have campers constantly cleaning up, we added straw to help.

Aida: How often dumpster emptied?

(conversation about why dumpsters fill so fast)

Mayor: weapons?

Markis: If we see anyone with a weapon, we'll say something. We do not want weapons.

Lloyd: I don't think anyone will come here with weapons.

Markis: we are comfortable with the safety level right now. Saturday night was a little edgy, but is better. We encourage calling 911, no one has had to.

Mayor: Discouraging of illegal activity.

Markis: I really haven't seen illegal activity. They are more comfortable, less anxiety, calmer, less need to go out and get trashed. They like being in community. We try to talk them down from bad behavior, our focus is serious safety issues. They don't want to call the police, but they will if needed.

Mayor: Fire marshal clear campfires are dangerous. Can we agree fires are prohibited?

Markis: can we have a burn barrel, such as on the bricks?

Aida: perhaps with a grate on top? With fire extinguishers.

Amy: can we have electricity for heaters? We are using fires for heat.

Lloyd: we want to do this in a safe manner. We need everyone to work together.

Mayor: above my pay grade, will consult with the Fire Marshal. Remember, our object is to find a better, safer situation.

Mayor: drugs/alcohol - -our view is that they escalate incidents. Our inclination is to ban drugs and alcohol.

Patricia: a lot of them have difficult trauma issues. Others drink to stay warm. No one wants to fall back into that world. People are traumatized by their experiences. Addictions shouldn't be banned. Better to get people clean than to put in jail.

Lloyd: if you put too many rules, but I have my things that help me survive. As long as people as a whole, you see something that is not right. Not everyone will agree with that. Someone might say this is what helps me survive this cold, this pain, this COVID flu. (...)

Patricia: these are people with addictions, with lifetime problems.

Aida: we are not distributing alcohol or anything. Any is individual choices.

Lloyd: everyone is trying to get along, feel the love and safety. If you say you can't do this, can't do that, then what can I do?

Patricia: you should see some of these conversations. I have seen some of the campers talk each other out of trouble.

Mayor: thank you, I appreciate your perspective.

Markis: I would appreciate outreach from Opportunity Council. We don't want a disturbance. But some already have services and some need services. A lot going on out there, outreach from the OC about their current clients would help.

Lloyd: There is safety when people are treated with love, respect, just asking you to take the time. (...)

Markis: I reached out to Unity Care, others have asked if Unity Care can take on a role. I want everyone to get the help they need. And lasting for them, too. Maybe get more fragile people hotel vouchers, etc.

Mayor: Parking, no long-term parking out front. Parking enforcement is suspended. We need to work toward agreement about use of that area.

Markis: the bus is the most efficient kitchen.

Lloyd: we can help each other, parking is a big issue all over the world. You create barriers by making people pay. Then I'll park wherever I can find a place. Then I get towed, then my bills get even higher, cycle continues.

Mayor: let us not get into the role of parking in City budget, in response to questions about parking.

Markis: do you validate? (joke, much laughter)

Mayor: Back to the operator issue. We're here to explore with you. You have some ideas about structure, which even that word may be loaded. We are not closing the door to exploring those things. We need to gain clarity about what your organizational structure might be. We know we put out an RFQ for tiny home operator. Reality is that longer-term provider will not come on line for several months. How can we bridge the time from now until then?

Markis: need to acknowledge too much need for one permit/one location (I didn't understand here...) From my perspective you have sites enough

Aida: back to the chicken/egg issue: are we going to wait for operator to reserve space for shelter? Or can you reserve space for shelter, start planning it, and trust us to operate it?

Mayor asks clarifying questions.

Aida: I would like to hear progress on those conversations about locations.

Mayor: we have professional staff who are of the opinion we need to have an organization with whom we enter agreements to manage and supervise the site. Can we prepare while we look? Yes we can, and there is work being done.

Peter: once you ID a site, there is a land use component, and then comes permitting. Someone/the organization has to be granted a permit.

Amy: (couldn't hear)

Amy: multiple organizations want to come together in an established coop to stop competing for resources.

Patricia: Competing for resources is the biggest issue with non-profits in Bellingham.

Lloyd: we don't need possibilities. We are trying to provide for everybody. How can we be safe if you put barriers on what we need? We need water, showers, food, first aid. It just makes it harder for everyone trying to do something positive.

Peter: some of these things, I've worked in different organizations, I've learned there are barriers. It is frustrating. There's a reason those came in to being. Then you look at them all, there are a lot of restrictions. I understand there are barriers, we the City have to grapple with those.

Patricia: you are examining from your point of view, we're analyzing from our point of view. I get that certain laws were made to protect, but sometimes situations are different and they can be limiting. There are always reasons, but these are people.

Mayor: we can do it. (appreciation from group)

Aida: thank you for more understanding about land use/permitting. Have land use consultants been looking at sites yet? Isn't that the first step to permitting?

Mayor: described that we use our staff for that evaluation. The one that is most ready to go to meet most needs, behind City Hall. We can get that ready to go relatively quickly.

Markis: is it big enough?

Patricia: we feel they are safer in front.

Lloyd: without space, we must be tightly fit.

Mayor: do you have sense of how many people on lawn, who are members of the community?

Markis: there are a lot of people we haven't seen yet. More coming.

Lloyd: you don't want anyone in your project who is going to be negative or rude. He talked about professionalism, telemarketing, etc. (I'm not following the thread here ...) You can't have some staff who are not projecting positivity.

Patricia: you have people doing these jobs who outside their jobs sneer at them. You can't come from that perspective. They are equals. You can't have people working there who kick them out for having disorders and trauma. When you limit the organizations you want to work with, you limit your ability to help.

Lloyd: we're trying to organize in a way to project safety and positivity. You have to expect things are going to happen. but you have to provide the right type of people and stand up for what you believe, in a positive, safe environment. We just want to come up with a solution that represents what we are talking about, to survive every day.

Markis: given COVID spacing, what shall we do with new people coming? We don't want to be far away from support.

Mayor: we all have opinions about clean ups vs. sweeps. (...) are some wanting to remain where they are at?

Markis: (talks about reality of people's wet tents, etc.) Word got out, people are wandering in. when they show up, where should they go?

Lloyd: describes need for way to keep possessions safe/locked up. Trying to help people protect their stuff, wash their hands, get some food. We're not going to let anything stop us from helping.

Patricia: for some of these campers, it is safer than base camp, esp. women, who say they have been assaulted. Some people feel safer here.

Lloyd: we want to provide, equal opportunity, we're not saying we're better, we want to make it equal opportunity. These are things we are seeing, and it is not right. We are standing firm on wanting to be safe, respected, treated equally.

Markis: before we leave the concept of camp clean ups vs sweeps, can we acknowledge they create crime? If I'm not there on sweep day, they take all my stuff, then I turn to the weakest people around me and take their stuff. That's how that works. If I have to take the dog's blanket off your porch to keep warm at night ... This cycle exists. There will be less of that if people can keep their things with them. I understand there is a need for some camps to be cleaned up. I don't see the model that makes that correct call. Chief Doll said it seemed like a good idea to have a health professional look at it. In general, when you lose your stuff you create instant trauma. That exists.

Lloyd: if you take away all my belongings, that's devastating. I just had some shoes, and somebody else just swept everything up, and now I have to start over ... but at the same time you want me to be clean and organized.

Patricia: people are already traumatized. You have to stop focusing on sweeps, they are traumatic.

Mayor: I appreciate everyone expressing yourselves.

Amy: have you ever been robbed? Had your home invaded? Stolen from you? What did that do to you? How was the rest of your day?

Mayor: 1987, 1st Ave in Seattle. Forceable situation, \$20 taken from me. My earnings from my restaurant job. I was mad and humiliated. I appreciate the point you are making.

Patricia: imagine if that was your only pair of shoes, or your blanket? Sometimes necessity brings more necessity. This cycle repeats itself.

Lloyd: we are trying to break this cycle. We are trying to protect each other. People who are homeless shouldn't be looked at any lower than anyone else. Equal opportunity. There shouldn't be any difference. There are all these barriers, you need to do everything from A-Z, then you do all those things, then there's the fine print. You're telling me there's something else, you didn't communicate that to me before. I'm going through that right now. Then when I get upset about it, I'm wrong. It is your job to communicate new information. Not my fault I don't have a phone or email. How are you going to motivate people if you keep putting barriers up? If I can't provide as a father, as a man, what am I going to tell my kids? (...) (an emotional conversation)

Markis: (talked about how barriers get in the way of success and reintegration and the transformations made with possibilities.) Concerned about parking situation. Are they safer here or on C Street? If more people show up, where should they go, I don't want to have to pack them in.

Mayor: thank you for sharing, I mean that, I'm grateful to hear. I was hoping we could convene another meeting. The object had been some discussion to get clarity about the organizational issue. The City has a range of options. We don't believe doing nothing is an option. We don't want to participate in forced removal. Best option is to work toward a new, managed site to help us get through cold winter months. That's what we regard as the best option. We need to find an operator. Minimum requirements, open to working with people on this. We can continue this conversation and the idea of a cooperative and how that might work. We've made it known our interests. We hope people will come forward with whom we can enter agreements. We are motivated, we'd like to work as quickly as we can.

Markis: I am thankful. The people out there are bonding, building relationships. They are the most difficult to help, it is good to see them bonding.

Aida: range of options, would like to advocate effort to seek more sites. (Markis agrees) Safe Haven available. Consider moving forward while we form our organization. It won't be challenging, we have what we need to operate it. We need do what we need to do to create our organization.

Peter: asks what's next with forming organization.

Aida: we're friends with Doug, leaning into that relationship and other cooperative development organizations to help us structure our organization.

Peter: I haven't been on the ground but with the population you are talking about I think you are looking for more involvement by more people on-site because the barriers are lower.

Aida: we're going through some of the most challenging things out there. Need your support for the legalities of things.

Mayor: we'll have to get in touch in the morning. Maybe we can meet one more time before the weekend.

Aida: afternoons pretty manageable.

Amy: Is there a legal reason we need a 501c3 specifically?

Peter: we need a legal entity that is an independent contractor to enter into a legal agreement.

Patricia: how many sites can we look forward to use? Once we ID that organizational structure?

Aida: agrees with that question.

Mayor: fair question. Why don't we have a more robust conversation about that when we next meet. I'll be more able to convey that when we meet next. Only a few sites are within the realm of consideration. Let's put that on the agenda for next time. I am on the record for putting a public site available for emergency.

Patricia: can we count on more than that? I don't want to just push them over there, like band aid over bullet hole. I'd like to know what sites are available, and for the longer term.

Aida: can planning department join us? We'd like to ask them questions about sites and permitting.

Mayor: good questions, in this moment the object is to bridge the gap between now and springtime, when we believe other options will be available to increase capacity. The conversation is ongoing. Immediate object is getting through winter.

Patricia: that's why we are emphasizing shelter, not just tents.

Mayor: Hopefully what we are working on is a solution.

Amy: let's let this be a permanent solution. Coops are not revolutionary there are a lot of examples.

Patricia: Permanent solutions work. Again, you can't just be putting a band aid over a bullet hole. Please focus on finding sites that can be permanent shelter, not just tents.

Amy: I'm so grateful to live in a city where we have a mayor who engages with us. We need that action!