

Part 1:

Emergency Actions to Preserve Austin's Autonomy

"Adler has said many times that addressing homelessness is the city's biggest issue."

"'We need long-term solutions,' he said. 'We need to know how long it's going to take and what it's going to take to get the job done. But in the near term, we have to do a better job of managing shared public spaces.'"--Austin American-Statesman January 22, 2021

The Mayor's statement says everything needed to understand the City's inability to make progress for the homeless. "Shared public spaces" does not include camping on city sidewalks, in parks, in roadway medians or under bridges. The Council's wait for "long-term solutions" has resulted in dithering gridlock. Five years after identifying homelessness as its biggest issue, the Council still does not know how long--or even what--it's going to take.

Austin must have IMMEDIATE solutions with improvements for homeless campers and rapidly clearing "hotspots" used for public camping. Only then will "long-term" efforts be viable and sustainable.

WHAT'S AT STAKE: AUSTIN'S AUTOMONY AND CHARACTER

Unless the City of Austin sends the message that it can act NOW to responsibly change course, it is clear that the Governor expects the Texas Legislature to take actions that will have long-term negative effects on Austin's autonomy. In addition, despite much talk and huge appropriations of money, the Council's actions are not helping to protect homeless people and are making them mere pawns in a community dispute that is not serving the homeless or the City well.

The Austin City Council should hold a special meeting immediately, adopt the plan below and ensure that actual changes are in effect and being implemented no later than February 15, 2021. Further delay will only seal the City's fate.

WHAT TO DO NOW: AUSTIN MUST ACT & PEOPLE MUST HAVE A PLACE TO GO

Interested parties who want to improve the lives of the homeless and love their city can go to bat for Austin with the Legislature but must be able to convey the City's sincere interest and dedication to reversing course, demonstrated by the following actions:

1. Identify the "hot spots" where people are camping on public property without the basic foundations of a decent existence, including security, water, restrooms, bathing facilities, trash disposal, etc. These areas include, but are not limited to, the sidewalks and park along Cesar Chavez, below the bridge at 7th Street and I-35, the median between lanes on East Riverside, along 290/71 in South Austin and 183 in North Austin.
 - These hotspots should be prioritized and dates scheduled to *rapidly* address each hot spot.

- Those living in hot spots areas should be incentivized to move to approved areas that will afford them a far better standard of living (e.g., see below), even if they continue camping in the new location(s).
 - The City should provide all needed assistance to move to the new location(s).
2. Announce that extraordinary benefits will be provided to improve the lives of the hundreds of people who will move to the new locations, including:
- Restroom facilities beyond porta-potties, including mobile facilities that can be driven into the new location(s) in succession as needed to scale to the volume of residents.
 - Shower facilities, including mobile facilities that can be driven into the new location(s) in succession as needed to scale to the volume of residents.
https://www.luxurylav.com/102-fr-2-stall-restroom-trailer-kEoc%7Cymc.html?gclid=Cj0KCQiAjKqABhDLARIsABbJrGm7h1PkMZ_Nr54b4h8jsz_pJLbzfx_QfKRq_003GGZtRy7LEr21tmEaAsqYEALw_wcB
 - Secure storage so residents' personal property cannot be stolen.
 - 24-hour security to protect residents from theft, assault and other crimes.
 - After an initial phase utilizing the residents' own tents or other shelters (and providing such to those who need them) provide for building "Conestoga Huts," which have been used successfully by non-profit groups in the Northwestern United States to provide one/two occupancy transitional housing for approximately \$2500 *per unit*.
<http://mrsc.org/Home/Stay-Informed/MRSC-Insight/April-2018/Conestoga-Huts-for-Housing-the-Homeless.aspx>
 - Make mobile food preparation/service facilities available.
 - Make public transportation available to/from the new location(s).
 - Provide supportive services at the new location(s).
3. Immediately announce the first new location to be readied for campers will be the former Home Depot at St. Johns and I-35 (7211 North Interstate 35). Homeless campers could literally relocate to this property in a day or two, with help from the City.

Despite numerous tentative plans for other uses of this property over the years, there is no higher priority than providing a decent location for those living outdoors with no basic facilities. All other plans can wait until a better, long-term solution is developed for those living outside. The \$17 million property is fully paid-for City property, which has sat virtually dormant for the better part of 9 years with only incidental use. It is capable of being easily secured and has fronts on three sides to I-35, vacant light industrial or a couple of light commercial properties. There is a substantial buffer, including two fences and about 150 yards, between the property and a neighborhood behind it. The number of people living in hotspots could be dramatically cut virtually overnight using this approach.

The property has:

- 14-acres

- Fencing surrounding the property with gates that can be staffed for security.
 - Nearly 400,000 square feet of paved area outside the building, interspersed with grass-covered medians and borders, providing ample space for social distancing. In other words, 400 campers could have 1,000 square feet of space *each* to camp or 800 could have 500 square feet, in either case many times the less than 100 square feet of space they each typically occupy in the hot spots today.
 - Offers ample room for social distancing
 - 140,000 square feet under roof where services could be provided and medically frail people housed. Preparations for use of this facility should be expedited.
 - Large commercial freight bay doors, through which almost any conceivable amenity can enter the building.
 - Electricity and water in ample supply.
 - Ingress and egress from I-35 frontage and side streets.
 - Near a Capital Metro bus line, which can be improved to serve these residents.
 - Nonprofit groups that have successfully deployed the Conestoga Hut solution suggest organizing around 80-unit groupings. The location offers ample room for up to 10 such groupings. Single females, people with disabilities, and other especially vulnerable populations could have areas reserved for their special needs with controlled access to those areas.
 - See: http://propaccess.traviscad.org/clientdb/Property.aspx?prop_id=230376&year=2021
4. Announce the use of already appropriated funds that can be repurposed to achieve the actions above. The current strategy of purchasing hotel rooms is slow and appears to cost about \$100,000 per room. Getting 80 people at a time into a motel will be extraordinarily expensive and is not making a dent in the 1300+ campers who need help NOW. The steps outlined above can promptly allow *hundreds* of people to relocate quickly.
 5. Re-instate as soon as possible the police academies the Council canceled, with appropriate training reforms to address police/community relations, racial and social justice, use of force and other identified reforms.
 6. Announce and take aggressive action to recruit and hire already licensed peace officers to fill vacant positions.
 7. Promptly convene a forum to improve relationships between the Council, the legislative delegation, law enforcement, and community groups that support law enforcement. Supporters of law enforcement can actually lead reforms if the current us-versus-them mindset of public discourse is eliminated.

This is a first step. The point is not to cut out social justice groups, or any other group, from discussion of and work on criminal justice issues. Those groups have had and will have many forums to press their positions. The message to the Legislature needs to be that the Council is

listening to its legislative representatives, community groups that support law enforcement and local businesses.

- The entire Austin/Travis County legislative delegation should attend.
- Attendance of all Council Members should be achieved, including the new ones.
- Representatives of the Austin Police Association and APD should attend.
- SafeTx and the Austin Crime Commission should attend.
- The Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association should attend.
- Each Chamber of Commerce should attend.

CONCLUSION: AUSTIN MUST ACT NOW, FOR THE HOMELESS AND THE CITY

"[Adler] suggested City Council members should get together with Austin residents to propose alternative solutions for addressing the city's growing homelessness crisis.

" 'Going back to where we were we know doesn't work – and what we're doing now we also know doesn't work,' Adler told the Statesman."--January 22, 2021

Agreed. The City must do something different and its must do so now.

The plan above could rapidly ameliorate the situation of the homeless people camping in the hotspots that are well-known to the community, the Legislature and the Governor. It is estimated that the lives of more than half of those living outside can be improved within 60 days if the City takes decisive action.

"Transitional" housing would first include their own camping equipment, followed by the implementation of the inexpensive Conestoga Hut solution. Mobile sanitation facilities allow phasing in and scaling up to meet the need at the old Home Depot site, while other suitable locations are identified and implemented.

The plan above can be used both to reverse the trends unleashed by repeal of the camping ordinance and demonstrate to state officials that the City Council has actually awakened.

TBA:

- Part 2: Austin's compliance with the Texas Constitution's "quid pro quo" requirement
- Part 3: A new State role: Carrots, Not Just Sticks