

Public Statement of Dirk Burhans to Columbia City Council, January 18, 2022

It is gratifying to see the public interest in an emergency warming center on tonight's agenda, and one hopes that the recent initiative for a permanent year-round full-capacity homeless shelter, called the Opportunity Campus, will fill a variety needs for the homeless in the long term. Today I would also like to draw attention to the homeless who are often most visible to us – our unsheltered homeless campers – the people who sleep in vacant wooded lots or under bridges. Since December 8th, three homeless camps have been forced to evict in Columbia; one where trash was in danger of falling onto the highway at Rt 63 & Conley Rd; one on Boone Electric Co-operative property near Rangeline and I-70, and one on MoDot property where there was concern about campfires near gas lines.

The hazard just mentioned above, fire, was also in the news last week when a homeless camp under a bridge in Kansas City caught fire and resulted in one death. Unsheltered campers will often burn scavenged synthetic materials while attempting to keep warm, creating fumes harmful to themselves and others. Other environmental problems created by unplanned camps include cutting of trees and vegetation, human waste, and trash, which often requires full-sized dumpsters for mass removal.

In 2020 John Trapp coordinated cleanup efforts at several sites around Columbia and filled several full-sized dumpsters; additional efforts coordinated by John Brown Gun Club members include semi-weekly trash pickups at several camps, but the scale of such patchwork mutual aid is far too small & infrequent to make much difference in the volume of trash generated at these sites.

The health problems of the homeless are well documented and it is estimated that their life expectancy is 17.5 years less than that of the general populace. Occupants are subject to infections requiring antibiotic treatment; cuts, bruises and broken bones from falls; heat exhaustion, and frostbite. Two unsheltered campers we served in the winter of 2018-19 lost digits to frostbite; one of these, has now lost a leg and is wheelchair bound.

It is true that much of the harm befalling homeless communities is self-inflicted. Stealing is rampant, with tents broken into, and personal items such as backpacks and stoves stolen. Stealing impacts community cohesion, because everyone becomes a suspect. Vandalism, violence, and retribution are common, resulting in sliced tents and burned sleeping bags, and domestic violence or violence between rivals is frequent, resulting in everything from knife wounds to battering to death. When threatened or vengeful campers call police during such a violent incident, the usual result is that the entire homeless camp is forced to evict. Over the 4 years that we have been working with homeless camps, we have seen campers forced to vacate camps along Providence Road, Fairview Road, Bernadette Drive, Ash Street, Garden Drive, and now near Clark Lane. A property listed at 1601 Rangeline, formerly the location of the Rainbow Village Trailer Park where the two campers mentioned above lost digits to frostbite, is now owned by Boone Electric Cooperative. Located away from residential neighborhoods and yet proximate to community services, 1601 Rangeline suggests a promising site for a permanent homeless camp, with concrete pads, shady trees, and potential sites for restrooms, an office, a community grill, lockers, and picnic area. Boone Electric has told me that they have plans to use this as a commercial property space. On December 8th about a dozen homeless campers were thus removed from this area while site grading occurred.

One might ask, given all of the perils of camping for the homeless, won't the proposed Opportunity Campus fill the bill? and the answer is yes, to an extent; it will especially provide relief during the hard winter months. But evidence from around the country has shown that homeless people who might never use a shelter will gladly use a camp. There are a myriad of reasons why some homeless will never use shelters, including: social anxiety; previous experiences of abuse in shelters; the requirement for photo-ID or surrender of possessions; forced abandonment of pets; and others.

We suggest that in addition to a brick & mortar shelter, Columbia consider creating a sponsored camp, and point to our sister city of Lawrence Kansas, which set up a camp city of heated tents in a city park starting in 2020. In the Great Depression, many American cities had government-sponsored camps with tents and showers; in 1937, the Farm Security Administration operated 95 such camps in California alone, housing some

75,000 people; it was in one of these camps that the fictional Joad family in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* started to turn their lives around. Last week, a lead story on NPR's Morning Edition mentioned a newly sanctioned homeless camp in Missoula Montana. Terms like "band-aid" and "temporary solution" and "stop-gap" were used by officials quoted in the story, but we believe that, because of the reasons listed above, there will always be unsheltered homeless campers in the community. Rather than resist this force, the city should view a sanctioned permanent camp as one tool in a toolbox. At a recent community meeting in December for Homeless Person's Remembrance Day, several speakers rightly commented about lack of affordable housing in Columbia, but what jumped out to us was the number of homeless campers we know who seem to be nowhere near ready for housing, but whose lives are beset by mental illness, emotional disorders, disputes, and substance abuse. The city can continue to spend money on post-hoc efforts involving police calls, emergency room visits, trash pickups, and public complaints, or it can spend money on solving a problem. If permanent housing is the stated goal, we suggest that the city consider a permanent sanctioned camp as one part of a continuum of services – from sanctioned camp, to an Opportunity Campus, and finally to a brick & mortar home; and if some of our homeless never 'graduate' to housing, so be it – at least a sanctioned camp offers a place for shelter, safety, food, health care, and a sense of permanence. Thank you.