MPR News | Minnesota Now St. Paul council president: After Pig's Eye, city needs to change approach to encampments 01M2NMYH481GSF22BXFNZ4ZZPW

NINA MOINI: Time to get the latest from St. Paul. It's been more than a month since the city shut down a homeless encampment where more than 100 people lived. Since then, seven people from the Pig's Eye encampment have made use of available shelter beds, seven people. That's according to a report from the city at the end of August.

There remains other encampments in the city. But St. Paul Mayor Kaohly Her has not yet announced when the city plans to close or clear those sites. Here for more details on this situation and other citywide issues is St. Paul city Council President Rebecca Noecker. Council President Noecker, thanks for being with us.

REBECCA NOECKER: Thanks so much for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: As you know, the city spent a million dollars or so to provide more emergency shelter and support. A lot of people kept saying, where are these people going to go, simply? Are they just going to move on to other nearby encampments? Are there enough shelter beds available? These were all considerations. And as we've noted, around seven people have moved into shelters so far, it seems like. I know you were supportive of the mayor's plans to clear Pig's Eye. Would you still say that was the right decision, seeing how things have evolved over time?

REBECCA NOECKER: Yeah, I mean, this is an incredibly complicated problem. And what I have been clear about from the beginning, including with the Pig's Eye encampment, is that we needed to find a place indoors for every single resident of the encampment to go. And remember, these are our neighbors. Many of us are personally affected by this issue of homelessness. Many of us know people, have family members. So it's really important to keep in mind that these are individuals who each have very specific needs, very specific backgrounds. And our system has failed them in so many ways.

So I think looking at the fact that so few people took us up on the offer of shelter is not about the individuals who said no to shelter. It's about the shelter that's being offered. And I think we, as government bodies, need to look ourselves in the eye, listen to our unhoused neighbors who are telling us, this isn't what we need, and respond in a different way. Shelter beds are just not the answer.

NINA MOINI: So are you engaging with people on what would be the answer? I mean, a million dollars spent just now on more emergency shelter. And it sounds like you're saying that isn't exactly what folks in this situation needed. So I wonder if that could have been spent in a different way. And what would you say would have been a better way, or moving forward, would be a better way to create ways for the city to fund and help to sponsor some of these more individualized forms of helping folks?

REBECCA NOECKER: Yeah, I went down to the Shepard-Randolph encampment, which is now the largest encampment in the city, which is in my ward, to speak with my constituents who are living there. And what they told me was pretty straightforward-- we want to go inside. But we need to go inside in a place where we can have some independence, not have an 8:30 PM curfew that treats us like children, be able to go in with a partner or with a friend or with someone else that we've met.

There's community that is built in these encampments. And it's a community that any of us would want for ourselves and that we seek out for ourselves as human beings. I need to be able to bring my dog inside. I need to be able to have a place where my property can come. And that doesn't happen in a shelter bed setting. So what we really need is more permanent supportive housing. We need individual units where people can live with others, with their property, with their pets.

And then we need to have supportive services on site. So mental health, chemical health, job training and resources, case management, counseling. Again, these are our neighbors who have been failed in every possible way by our systems. We have to have those services readily available to them. And to the million dollars, you're right, I mean, we are dealing with a long-term problem that we and others have failed to deal with over time.

That is not on the city exclusively. I would say it is by far more on the county and the state that have not been building this kind of housing over time. Band-aids are expensive. And at this point, what we are doing is putting a band-aid on a very long-term problem.

NINA MOINI: I think some folks that we've talked with on the show here on*Minnesota Now*-- and we've been fortunate to hear a variety of perspectives, from a nurse practitioner that felt like she lost contact with a lot of the patients and the people that were at Pig's Eye that she had created relationships with.

As you mentioned, a lot of folks just moved to that Randolph and Shepard encampment, which a lot of advocates for folks there and people living there themselves, residents, say was extremely disruptive and that people warned the city for the month leading up to it of the notice that they got. People were really imploring the city not to move ahead with this. So with that in mind, and with this group of folks now over at the Randolph-Shepard encampment, what do you know about any plans the city or Mayor Her might have to close down or clear other encampments at this point? Is that on hold for now?

REBECCA NOECKER: Yeah, at this point, there's no timeline for closing the Shepard-Randolph encampment. And I have been really clear with the mayor and her team that we need to learn from what happened at Pig's Eye. We absolutely need to take accountability for that. We need to recognize that that did not work. We did not serve our neighbors who were living there well. And so now it's not about closing when we have enough beds. It's about finding those spaces that actually meet people's needs. And until we do that, I don't think we should move forward with any closure.

NINA MOINI: I want to shift gears because we only have limited time with you, and we really appreciate it. Last week, the council decided not to move forward with a vote to expand the drone program by the St. Paul Police. There are residents who are concerned about the extent of surveillance, privacy limits, military contracts the company supplying the drones is involved with. St. Paul Police says drones help them save lives and that they have strict privacy controls around this. What were you hearing that was concerning from residents? And what would it take for you to reconsider that?

REBECCA NOECKER: Yeah, I've been hearing a lot of questions, a lot of distrust from my constituents when it comes to mass surveillance, when it comes to technology, like ALPRs, when it comes to drones. I led the fight to get rid of our Flock cameras a couple of weeks ago in response to those concerns. And I really think we need to be listening to people on this.

We are in a time not only in Operation Metro Surge, but with the federal government actively targeting our communities, targeting our election systems. This is not science fiction. This is happening. Our constitutional rights are being threatened. And so people are right to be asking these questions. And as government, we need to respond. And what we agreed as a council was that we just don't have the answers to those questions right now to allow us to expand a program that is already in place.

NINA MOINI: And can you just say what your questions are? What questions would St. Paul Police have to answer? Is it about where the information goes? I think that they've said that they've answered a lot of the privacy-related questions. What are some outstanding questions?

REBECCA NOECKER: Yeah, the biggest questions have to do with the data, how it's stored, how it's shared, how long it's retained, and what kinds of provisions we have within the contract to make sure that if something were to change within the company's bylaws or structures, that we would know about that, the public would have insight into that. Again, with our Flock system, we were very careful. We shared it only with Minnesota companies or entities. And they violated our trust and shared that data with the federal government. So there's a lot of reason to be distrustful. And we have to be able to have that transparency with our constituents.

NINA MOINI: Oh, I also want to ask you while we've got you, the news that just came out that a Florida investor has bought two more downtown St. Paul buildings, bringing the total to four. You and I have talked a lot in the past about revitalizing downtown. I know that's very important to you. Do you see this as a positive step toward that revitalization?

REBECCA NOECKER: I absolutely do. I was actually door knocking on the west side the other night. And I saw that number 1 shining brightly over the bluffs at the First National Bank building and thought to myself, this is a good sign, literally and figuratively, for downtown. Yeah, I think Mr. Rand has the right motives and is truly invested in our community. And getting these core downtown buildings into the right hands is absolutely the right step in revitalizing our downtown.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, Council President Noecker, as you know, Mayor Kaohly Her is currently under investigation for allegations of sexual harassment by St. Paul Police Chief Axel Henry that were brought forward in April. An outside law firm is doing an independent investigation. Have you or the council heard any updates on when that investigation will wrap up and how and when the public will be informed of its findings?

REBECCA NOECKER: I have not heard any updates. I know that the investigation hasn't yet concluded, and the council will be notified when it is. And I will tell you, I am so eager for this investigation to wrap up so that we can move past it and get back to the critical work that the city is doing. We are doing good stuff. And we really need to focus on that.

NINA MOINI: All right, thanks very much for your time, Council President Noecker.

REBECCA NOECKER: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: That's St. Paul City Council President Rebecca Noecker. We also requested an interview with Mayor Her, but she was not available.