



Land Use & Environment Committee

Ordinance to Prohibit Camping on the Public Area Surrounding Olympia City Hall

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Agenda Item:

Ordinance to Prohibit Camping on the Public Areas Surrounding Olympia City Hall

Issue:

For several weeks, overnight camping in front of and near City Hall has increased, along with health and safety concerns.

Committee Recommendation:

Not referred to a committee.

City Manager's Recommendation:

Move to pass the ordinance on first and final reading prohibiting sleeping and camping on the property surrounding City Hall.

Staff Contact:

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Presenter(s):

Steve Hall, City Manager

Background and Analysis:

Camping on the steps and landing of Olympia City Hall is creating an immediate and urgent threat to public safety and public health. In particular, the behaviors, activities, and results of camping pose an immediate threat to members of the public and public employees who use or attempt to use the City Hall building.

In recent months, increasing numbers of individuals have begun camping on the plaza and surrounding areas of the City Hall building at 600 4th Avenue East in downtown Olympia. Individuals have been observed camping in front of City Hall overnight and on weekends, making this space and access to the City Hall payment drop box and front doors unavailable to others.

Last Monday, 17 individuals were sleeping or lying in front of the City Hall front doors at 7:00 a.m. Over the Thanksgiving weekend, about 30 individuals were observed camping in front of City Hall at various times. As of last week, individuals are starting to set up their camping spaces in front of the main doors as early as 5:15 p.m., even though City Hall is open for evening meetings.

As the number of campers has grown, so have concerns and complaints of hazardous and unsafe conditions as a result of the camping. City maintenance, police and customer service staff report having picked up syringes, condoms, cigarette butts, and increasing amounts of garbage - including cooking residue, cardboard, tarps, sleeping bags, blankets, and clothing left behind by campers. In addition, it is commonplace for facilities staff to clean up and wash away urine and feces around the area.

Also, increasingly aggressive behaviors by the campers and accompanying animals have made it unsafe for City employees to access the area coming and going from the building. In addition to verbal confrontations, on November 27 an employee was attacked by the dog of one of the campers as she attempted to enter the City Hall building. While the employee escaped injury, her coat was ripped as the dog bit into it and attempted to drag her down. The owner of the dog was cited for the incident. In addition, recently Olympia police cited at least one camper for urinating on the City Hall building; another individual was arrested for making over 100 intimidating calls to the 9-1-1 system; and another person camping in front of City Hall was arrested in conjunction with an alleged murder at another location.

Citizen use of City Hall has also been compromised. City staff have received several complaints from people who are uncomfortable entering and leaving City Hall for evening meetings or who are reluctant to or cannot access the utility payment drop box due to large gatherings of people camping or preparing to camp, some of whom are accompanied by dogs that bark or snarl as customers attempt to approach City Hall. Last week, eight different individuals made unsolicited verbal complaints to the customer service staff that they felt uncomfortable walking to and leaving payments in the overnight drop box, which necessitated additional trips and time to conduct their business at City Hall during the day when the customer service counter was open.

In addition to public health and safety concerns, another major issue is the privatization of public space. The City Hall complex represents the people's building. When a group of people decide to take over that space by camping or dominating use of the space, others feel unsafe or uncomfortable accessing the City Hall building. This includes members of the public as well as City staff.

Neighborhood/Community Interests (if known):

Several individuals have complained about lack of access to the drop box and concern about health and safety.

Options:

1. Pass the ordinance prohibiting camping on City Hall property on first and final reading.
2. Pass the ordinance on first reading, with second reading on December 11.
3. Do not pass the ordinance.

Financial Impact:

If camping is prohibited, these staff resources can be returned to regular duties.

- 2-4 facilities staff who are cleaning the front of City Hall each weekday morning instead of doing other work (anywhere from 3 to 8 hours collective of diverted staff time per day).
- 1-2 police officers, for anywhere from 1/2 to one hour each day, who are informing campers of the need to move and who are waiting until they do so.