

October 5th, 2021

Public Comment Regarding Morris Street RV Encampment, Public Health and Safety

Attn: City of Sebastopol City Council

I am writing you this letter to express my concerns about the continued allowance of the unauthorized and illegal "Safe Parking" on Morris Street and Laguna Park Way.

I have worked at The Barlow for several years as part of the management team. My day-to-day activities including working with our facilities and property manager who work onsite at the campus. My team includes many hard-working people who help keep our campus beautiful and welcoming for all visitors. The Barlow's facility is a visual highlight for anyone coming to Sebastopol. We have tourist from all over the world visit our facility and welcome over 60,000 customers each month.

The Barlow and the greater Sebastopol area is home away from home and it's a really special place that I've watched first hand transform through the years.

The Barlow and its businesses have been facing negative repercussions from an ever-growing, persistent homeless encampment. In the last 18+ months, the campus has been littered with trash and my team has an on-going experience improper use of the facilities. My team members have found exposed needles and feces on our campus, posing a threat not only to my team members, but also to our customers, their children and their pets.

Most recently, we have started to utilize the Barlow's secondary property on 385 Morris Street for overflow parking for public events like Peacetown, IPA10k, Headwest Marketplace and more.

I am saddened that my team is met with destruction to the site regularly when accessing it. It is filled with graffiti, trash. Vital items and supplies are stolen, which only started to occur regularly after the encampment took shape.

When opening the 385 Morris Street site for parking, I have constantly witnessed dangerous conditions with people accessing the site with their vehicles due to RVs blocking the view of swiftly moving oncoming traffic. I myself almost hit someone on a bicycle because I could not see past the RV's parked on Morris Street. To know that I could have caused someone harm as a result of an illegally parked RV is very troubling.

Pedestrians walk in the street to avoid the cluttered sidewalks that now act as the RVs' personal spaces filled with propane, gas tanks, trash, tables and chairs, storage items, etc. Using the sidewalk here means that you are walking between a tall cinderblock wall and a tall RV with no visibility from the public view. Essentially, you are walking through someone's "backyard", only one step from their door which is very intimidating and as a female, it feels scary.

I don't know who the people are who live in the RVs, and neither does the City. I have been told that our team has been met with aggression and intimidation on more than one occasion.

It's upsetting to see that bicyclists are pushed further into Morris Street since the bike lane is blocked by the RVs parked here.

Children are hesitant or all together resist using the Skate Garden due to the proximity of the RVs and instead cross the street to use the walkways of The Barlow. As a mother, it's upsetting to think that these residents could very well be registered sex offenders but it feels like nobody from the City seems to care. I would not approve of my children to use this public space in the current situation. I'm sure many other parents agree with me.

This industrial area of Sebastopol is a hub for tourism and the entrance to the City. It's a place where the community gathers for entertainment, food, shopping, park access, trails, sporting events and even a place where people get married. Yet, I've been told first hand that it's better that RVs be parked near The Barlow than in other areas of Sebastopol.

All the RV dwellers have been offered shelter and services. I would like to see them accept the help that is being offered. Why isn't the County building RV sites that would be safe and secure for the unhoused and return our streets and sidewalks for their intended purposes? Wouldn't it be better if people living in these RVs had a place to park their RVs that was not on a public street, next to protected Laguna, next to two children's playgrounds and a community center?

I continue to wonder why my voice is not heard and why I must continue to apologize to my staff. "I'm sorry, I've tried everything I can to make this situation better for our team, but I'm not getting anywhere with The City", "I'm sorry the City does not believe we're being truthful about the dangerous ingress and egress you face daily when you come to work", "I'm sorry but The City think's we're exaggerating about the conditions you're faced with", "I'm so sorry you have to clean up human feces, I would never wish that on anybody", "I'm sorry you have to pick up the used needle you almost stuck yourself with".

I'm tired of saying sorry to my team. I'm disappointed that The City has put me and my team in this position and I'm upset that I can't provide my team with the enjoyable and safe work environment that they once had before this encampment took shape. What the City of Sebastopol has continued to allow here is simply unacceptable.

I have written to Council and spoken to the City Manager and other members of City staff over the last several months. None of our health and safety concerns have been addressed.

I am not in support of adding more conveniences to support the illegal RV encampment. I am not in support of privately held meeting with Ad Hoc Committees and Stakeholders (Item 10) that don't allow the opportunity for transparent discussions and voting to take place.

This issue impacts Sebastopol residents, business owners, employees, guests, neighborhood children, pets, visitors, bicyclists, joggers, and so many more people. If that is the only direction the City insists on taking, then I feel it only right that our tenants and ownership group being so closely impacted by this "Safe Parking" be given seats on the committee.

Although this is submitted as public comment, I do hope that this prompts a further discussion amongst the City Manager, Police Chief, Mayor and City Council to reconsider my repeated request to have timed parking added to portions of Morris Street and Laguna Park Way and have this ongoing matter added to the next Council agenda.

Thank you,
Yolanda Mathew
Operations Director