

Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

Tom Early, Chair • Steve Zemke, Vice-Chair
Weston Brinkley • Leif Fixen • Reid Haefer • Donna Kostka • Richard Martin • Joanna Nelson de Flores
Erik Rundell • Andrew Zellers

October 12, 2016

Mayor Edward Murray,
Council President Bruce Harrell,
Councilmember Lisa Herbold,
Councilmember Kshama Sawant,
Councilmember Rob Johnson,
Councilmember Debora Juarez,
Councilmember Mike O'Brien,
Councilmember Sally Bagshaw,
Councilmember Tim Burgess, and
Councilmember Lorena González,
Seattle City Hall
600 4th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98124

RE: Opening Parks property to homeless encampments

Dear Mayor and Councilmembers,

Homelessness is a complex issue that impacts not only those experiencing it but our whole community. City government and the community need to come up with a permanent solution, possibly supported through a ballot measure or other mechanisms to properly fund an effort that addresses the multiple needs of our homeless community members. Camping in Parks property doesn't provide the necessary services and support people experiencing homelessness need.

Seattle Parks and Recreation briefed the Commission on their work to inform City Council on the ordinance it is considering that would allow homeless encampments on Parks property. It appears to us that such an ordinance is a piecemeal approach to a matter requiring a holistic comprehensive solution, and doesn't address ongoing concerns like sanitation, safety, and public health that multiple, scattered encampments in parks can result in for both the people experiencing homelessness and the public.

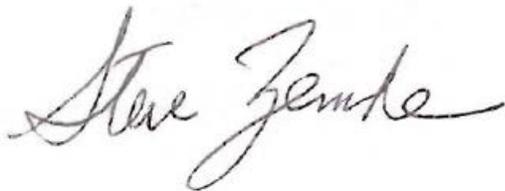
The Commission opposes opening Parks property to homeless encampments because we are also concerned about the significant impacts encampments are having on the urban forest and more than 11 years of community-based restoration efforts. Since 2005, over 840,000 volunteer hours and millions of dollars in City funding have supported forested parkland and natural area

restoration efforts through the Green Seattle Partnership. Impacts not only include trampling newly planted trees and understory vegetation in restoration sites, but also the demoralizing effect this proposal has already had on hundreds of both resident and visiting volunteers who have been working tirelessly to restore our forested parklands, not to mention exposing urban forestry staff, volunteers, and parks visitors to unsafe conditions. We believe it might make more sense to accommodate camping in areas that can provide services such as running water, garbage disposal, restrooms or port-a-potties, and allow access for emergency vehicles.

The news reports and editorials that we have seen on Portland's similar policy suggest its efforts were unsuccessful and had negative impacts on park property, including the difficulty of limiting encampments to only certain areas of the parks.

The Commission advises City Council to postpone voting on such an important issue until an opportunity for all stakeholders to weigh-in is provided; there is a better understanding of the impacts on our urban forests; and a diverse set of potential solutions that meet the urgent needs of both the homeless and protecting our urban forests and parks is duly evaluated.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve Zemke". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steve Zemke, Vice-chair
Seattle Urban Forestry Commission

cc: Jessica Finn Coven, Jesús Aguirre, Scott Kubly, Robert Stowers, Doug Critchfield, Jon Jainga, Darren Morgan, Dionne Foster, Eric McConaghy.

Sandra Pinto de Bader, Urban Forestry Commission Coordinator
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