

Park camp should come down but solutions still needed

Dan McCaffery - May 2024

City council is right to insist that homeless encampments be removed from Rainbow Park. They should not be allowed in any public park for that matter. Green spaces were established for the enjoyment of everyone in the municipality. They are vital to our quality of life. Without parks we would be living in concrete jungles.

But it's not just a matter of having the police drag the homeless out of parks by the hair. Those people have to go somewhere.

Chatham-Kent has come up with what looks like a workable solution – the construction of 50 mini-cabins, each consisting of a scant 100 feet of floor space. That's not much more room than you'd find in a backyard shed.

Such cabins wouldn't provide much in the way of living space but they would surely be better than living in a tent. Especially during the winter months.

Another solution might be to turn an abandoned building into a shelter. The old Sarnia General Hospital might have been ideal for such a facility but it was demolished.

But what about an old school? Such buildings are being closed all the time. The next time a school is shuttered, the province should consider filling it with cots for the homeless. I suspect you could easily get 10 cots into a classroom, or 80 in the average school. Put another 50 cots in the gymnasium and you'd have accommodations for 130 people. Replace the cots with bunk beds and you could double that number. There would also be washroom facilities, something that's not available in a place like Rainbow Park.

Some question whether we should do anything at all to help these people. One city councillor, Bill Dennis, is quoted in the media as saying "they made their own bed and they are lying in it. They are choosing to be homeless."

It's true some people make poor life choices that come back to haunt them. Some drop out of high school or get addicted to illegal drugs. An uneducated drug addict isn't going very far.

Others are just down on their luck. They may have mental health problems or other health issues. But whether they've made bad choices (often when they were just teenagers) or simply had bad luck as adults, society should not abandon them altogether.

We should be looking for ways to get them back on their feet. And the first step is to get a roof over their heads. It's the right thing to do.