

City Talk Column for January 24, 2024  
Community Development Department  
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### **Safe Place to Park thoughts**

I never thought I'd want to remind anyone that when I was hired to be the city's Housing Manager, I was, by some definitions, homeless. I was living in a teardrop camper, alternating two-week stays in the National Forests with campground and RV park stays. What started as a 10-day vacation became a way of life for a year. I needed that. I wasn't destitute, I wasn't using alcohol or drugs, I wasn't littering or destroying the forest. I was simply house-free. But, after accepting the position with the city, I wanted to find housing. To say I had "sticker shock" is an understatement. So, I completely understand why so many working people make the choice to live in their vehicles here. Simultaneously, having worked in housing and neighborhood development my entire career, I understand that for many, living in their vehicle isn't a choice, but an unfortunate necessity. That's why the Safe Place to Park program for working residents of Sedona makes perfect sense to me. But, for some, it doesn't. The negative rhetoric surrounding the proposed program is unfortunate. This is not a proposed homeless encampment, but a thoughtfully designed program.

The city's housing staff spent months researching similar programs across the country, studying best-practices and tailoring those to fit the uniqueness of Sedona. Multiple other departments were consulted and helped develop the plan including Sustainability, Legal, Public Works, Community Development and the Police Department. The program design, to which the City Council gave a nod of approval at the January 9th meeting, requires all vehicles to exit during the daytime hours, along with all their belongings. No tents may be erected, no canopies set up, no encampments. Fire hose will be repurposed to mark parking spaces on the dirt, no trees will be removed and greywater will be reused to water existing trees. Lighting will be solar powered. No fires or smoking will be allowed, except for cooking in designated areas. Showers and bathrooms provided will be mobile. The entire site is temporary, as everyone is excited to start working on the master plan for the future uses of the Cultural Park site.

The well-respected Verde Valley Homeless Coalition has agreed to manage the site and provide social services connections and housing assistance to participants with a goal of getting participants into housing they can afford. It is a pilot program with room to pivot. It may be extended for as long as the site remains available, but there are no plans for it to be permanent. The list of rules, though extensive, is fairly easy to follow with these basic tenets: come, be nice and quiet, sleep peacefully, then leave, every day. The rules are as much to assuage the fears of comfortably housed residents as to protect the city and participants.

Despite all of this, there has been opposition, not concerned letters asking if we thought about one thing or another, but criticisms based on unfounded assumptions about participants and management. There has also been widespread support. Somewhere in the middle are the folks saying, "Is this the best we can do?" No, it isn't. This is just one strategy out of many that we're working on. The city's housing staff is working on over 500 proposed new housing units across eight projects in the predevelopment pipeline in addition to running three small programs and constantly working to improve housing and homelessness challenges in Sedona. We know that no single project or program can solve our housing

woes on its own. The diversity of solutions must match the diversity of needs we carefully identify and study continuously.

The Safe Place to Park will provide working people who live in their vehicles a way to do so in compliance with the law, with security and sanitation facilities not available elsewhere, while keeping them close to work and community. It can prevent otherwise stable residents from falling into permanent homelessness due to sudden life changes, and provide resources most working people aren't accustomed to seeking. It can reduce overnight parking in other parts of the city and reduce the overuse of nearby forest lands. And, its participants can help inform housing development in the pipeline of their housing needs, because that is the ultimate goal: to place participants in the program into permanent housing. Fears of worst-case scenarios and all-or-nothing thinking won't move the needle on housing and homelessness issues. This community's respect for and understanding of diverse needs combined with resources, research and commitment will.