



TRIANGLE
GOLDEN TRIANGLE
CREATIVE DISTRICT



Uptown
on the Hill



OCTOBER 12, 2020

TO: HON. MICHAEL HANCOCK | MAYOR OF THE CITY AND COUNTY OF DENVER

FROM: CAPITOL HILL UNITED NEIGHBORHOODS, INC., COLFAX AVE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT, GOLDEN TRIANGLE CREATIVE DISTRICT, AND UPTOWN ON THE HILL RNO

SUBJECT: HOMELESS ENCAMPMENTS & A WAY FORWARD

CC: DENVER CITY COUNCIL
ROBERT MCDONALD, DENVER DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Greetings Mayor Hancock,

Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods (CHUN), Colfax Ave Business Improvement District (CBID), Uptown on the Hill (UOTH), Golden Triangle Creative District (GTCD), and several other neighborhood partners have received inquiries regarding the seeming surge of homeless encampments in Central Denver. To our disappointment and concern, some of the inquiries have turned into hostilities. Where collaboration is paramount, we see shoulder shrugging. We are committed to working with you. We offer our energy and organizational support at this critical time.

Our groups have initiated conversations with neighbors and surveyed community stakeholders to shape a path forward vis-à-vis encampments. In doing so, we have identified a number of immediate next steps where the city can (a) support the unhoused with safe, immediate options; (b) engage collaborative partners immediately on new ideas and their implementation; and (c) lay the groundwork for long-term solutions.

Neighborhood groups, BIDs, and creative districts have an obligation to be your thought partners. It is important for us to span the divide between the homeless and housed, to connect neighbors with elected officials, and to examine this initiative in a comprehensive way. We offer the following opportunities for your consideration:

- 1. Initiate a “Bring Us Your Best Ideas” strategy.** Selecting state-owned and city-owned sites for large tent encampments may be at an impasse. Our research has revealed an insufficient level of engagement from the city with direct service providers, communities of faith, and other nonprofit human-service organizations. We are aware of a number of organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, who have the facilities, capacity, know-how, and active interest in supporting the city’s efforts to tackle homelessness and mitigate the concerns brought on by encampments.

Action Item: Launch an RFP process to gather, review, and determine where immediate options are available to support the unhoused and reduce the number of encampments.

- 2. Reconsider a one-size-fits-all approach.** If homeless advocates and direct service providers are willing and able to provide temporary accommodations to those who are homeless, let us be solutions-oriented and open to new opportunities and innovative approaches. Our research has determined multiple barriers in the city's current process. For example, we are aware of a former monastery/clergy house that has been suggested as a potential shelter but was turned down due to zoning restrictions. A church near the state capitol was approached by the city to house homeless individuals inside; the facility itself could not accommodate, but why not use the parking lot? Smaller sites located throughout the city, rather than the larger scale sites being proposed, would be easier to establish and make clear that this is a Denver problem to solve, rather than one for only a few neighborhoods to address.

Action Item: If we can offer flexibility for outdoor dining or variances to support continued development, the city has a duty to adopt a nimbler strategy—site-specific, customized, and one that engages the experts on the ground. Smaller sites with fewer occupants, while admittedly is less efficient, is likely to be more palatable for neighborhoods to adopt in the near term.

- 3. Provide comprehensive services at each site.** Those who offered their parking lots, vacant warehouses, etc. have encountered unnecessary bureaucratic challenges. This is unsatisfactory from our perspective. We have learned some homeless advocates have encountered roadblocks as they advocated for more services at each proposed encampment site (National Western, Denver Coliseum, Pepsi Center, Empower Field at Mile High, to name a few). At your request, we are happy to share our list of potential sites, which align with others that have already been presented to your team.

Action Item: Health care, mental health services, addiction recovery, sanitation support, etc. must be provided to each site. Perhaps a roaming support team would work better than offering services only at the proposed large sites.

- 4. Provide status report for sites under consideration.** A progress or feasibility report for sites already suggested by City Council, the Mayor's staff, and others seems appropriate at this time. Not communicating this information is working against our shared objectives. In doing so, these actions have led to speculation and frustration and has complicated matters further. Our groups are often forced to say "We don't know" or "Your council member may have more information" to those who inquire.

Action Item: Similar to zoning requests or a landmark designation, the City has a duty to report where matters stand.

- 5. Expand the list of potential SOS and temporary SOS sites.** Homelessness is systemic in origin and requires community-wide solutions. A number of groups have suggested additional Safe Outdoor Space (SOS) sites, to little avail. We echo these concerns. We also feel that it is important for neighborhoods throughout Denver to share in our mission to address homelessness head on.

Action Item: Provide assurances that the City has a long-term plan in place to continue support of those experiencing homelessness after temporary SOS program is discontinued, and to provide permanent housing for as many as possible.

- 6. Don't displace; thoughtfully relocate.** Given the complexity of this issue, we cannot lose sight of our humanity's struggles and empathy for others. Telling people experiencing homelessness to move along is demeaning to them and unhelpful to all, as they, out of necessity, must find another place to rest. The justified concerns of neighbors to having tents in public rights-of-way must also be taken into

account. And, as one homeless advocate noted, “It’s okay to give public rights of way the opportunity to rest.” Moving encampments to other locations can and should be done infrequently and with compassion and care.

Action Item: (1) Relocate existing encampments to sanctioned, accessible sites. (2) Ensure sites are geographically accessible by foot or mass transit. (3) Incentivize relocation with comprehensive levels of services awaiting the unhoused upon arrival (e.g. job readiness, access to meals, educational needs, and so forth). (4) Deliver sanitation and other basic needs; provide health care, mental health support, access to vaccinations. And (5) Ensure measurable outcomes and evaluate successes on an ongoing basis.

- 7. Designate a clear point of contact.** We applaud efforts to build affordable housing, provide sheltering, and develop new revenue streams. Unfortunately, time is not friendly in this regard. Policy outcomes seem to be languishing. How do we share concerns with the city, and what do we communicate with our own constituencies? It remains unclear how, and to what extent, neighborhood groups should raise concerns with the City. Who is our point of contact? What is the follow-through?

Action Item: The city should take sweeping action, appointing a chief strategist who will bring clarity, focus, and a sense of cohesiveness to this undertaking.

- 8. Tell us what we can do for you?** Concurrently, how do we advise neighbors? To whom should we direct them. While 311 may be sufficient under normal circumstances, we do not feel this is adequate at this juncture. Perhaps a step-by-step outreach guide makes the most sense. We do not want neighbors to target those most in need, but we do need guidance as to how we remedy certain situations. Whom does one contact for a homeless individual requiring immediate attention? Some have reported 2-hour wait times from DPD.

Action Item: Engage our groups to support your efforts in rolling out such plans; we can be your conduit to neighbors, small business owners, school officials, et al.

We want to thank your team, including Evan Dreyer, et al, for meeting with us in recent weeks. These are certainly unprecedented, challenging times; we recognize and applaud the commitment and service personified by our city’s public workforce—whether the Denver Health employee on the front lines of the global pandemic or the decision maker developing policies in your office.

We know this work can be difficult. Thus, we are especially grateful for your administration’s efforts to address homelessness in the Mile-High City. Your thoughts and perspectives on our vision in the coming days will be much appreciated.

Travis Leiker, President | **Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods**
Frank Locantore, Executive Director | **Colfax Ave Business Improvement District**
Judy Trompeter, President | **Uptown on the Hill RNO**
Byron Zick, Executive Committee | **Golden Triangle Creative District**