

City Of Seattle Should Cooperate With Residents Of The Jungle

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A little reflection will show that there is beyond question a body of very important but unorganized knowledge which cannot possibly be called scientific in the sense of knowledge of general rules: the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place. It is with respect to this that practically every individual has some advantage over all others because he possesses unique information of which beneficial use might be made, but of which use can be made only if the decisions depending on it are left to him or are made with his active coöperation.

Fredrich Hayek, The Use of Knowledge in Society

Seattle has, for many years, been contending with what it has considered to be a problem called The Jungle, and ad hoc encampment created by previously homeless people underneath Interstate 5, the city's main freeway. The Jungle has vexed more than one Mayor, and the City's current Mayor surprised many when he said, "I don't have the answer," . . . speaking about The Jungle and Seattle's overall homelessness crisis. "We're actually making this up as we go along." In a way, the Mayor's confusion is because The Jungle isn't as much of a problem as it is an answer, one that has been created by real people in response to a City bureaucracy and non-profit housing developers that would rather build billion dollar housing projects than help people suffering today.



Photo from multi-jurisdictional report on The Jungle.

There is an important difference between improvisation and spontaneity. Improvisation requires a method, and while it is, in many ways, “making it up as we go,” it is taking known items within our knowledge and assembling them like Legos; each time we improvise we might build something different, but it will always follow the same basic rules of snapping together the pieces available to us.

Spontaneity, on the other hand, is relying – having faith in – people who actually have knowledge we don’t and believing the when they tell us something will work it won’t because they are closer to the problem. And people with unique knowledge of a challenge or a problem should be relied upon for addressing it in an effective and efficient way. That’s not happening in Seattle with The Jungle or homelessness. Instead the Mayor is still playing with the same old Legos his predecessors did and proposing to “sweep” The Jungle of its inhabitants, presumably with force.

In a newsletter article the executive director of non-profit housing developer Capitol Hill Housing, Chris Persons wrote,

“Let’s take a look at the math. The cost of building a single unit of apartment housing in Seattle depends on a lot of factors, but \$200,000 is a reasonable estimate. At that price, housing the estimated 10,000 homeless people in Seattle would cost \$2 billion.”

Persons later backtracked on part of his math, admitting in a correction that the estimate for the homeless population he cited was for King County, not just Seattle. But he failed to account for the fact that his unit cost is low by most standards. In some hot housing markets like San Diego unit cost have gotten as high as \$450,000 and New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Authority has imposed a limit on costs of \$250,000 per unit on projects using Low-Income Housing Tax Credits. So Persons’ assumption might be off by a significant factor and it doesn’t even include the costs of operating so many units of housing into the future.

And what does this have to do with The Jungle? A recent multijurisdictional investigation found that the issues faced by residents of The Jungle and they included:

- Family situation
- Financial and employment situation
- Physical and mental health condition
- Ability to access personal documentation such as state-issued identification
- Criminal record history
- Drug or alcohol dependence
- Tenure in the encampment
- Pets

What do those things mean practically? Residents of The Jungle haven’t gone to usual shelters because many of them are segregated by sex, so married couples have to separate. Shelters don’t allow pets and often require valid identification. If a person has a warrant for their arrest, they are a lot less likely to go into a shelter, and many people simply don’t want to have to follow the rules and curfews of some shelters that impact work schedules. And some people simply prefer the consistency of the encampment to being in a shelter when they balance the pros and the cons, just like any other person making a housing choice.

The Jungle is, in truth, a spontaneous community based solution for a group of people who are without shelter or housing. The people in The Jungle have a sense of community, banding

together against government overreach to try and maintain some autonomy and demanding help to improve their solution. The residents of The Jungle haven't asked for \$200,000 housing units nor can they wait for them. Their website, Operation Jungle Defense, says it best:

Stop working against the community and learn to work with the community to help resolve safety and cleanliness issues. The city should have community meetings with this "Jungle" neighborhood just like they do in all other Seattle communities.

The Jungle can and will go away not with billions of dollars wrung out of market rate housing through Mandatory Inclusionary Zoning or aggressive sweeps, but by trying to address the issues that make existing shelter options unworkable for some and reducing the harm in the meanwhile by providing reasonable sanitation and public safety – just like what's required and done in any other housing setting. Ending encampments in general and The Jungle in specific relies on Seattle government doing what it has a very poor track record of doing: listening to people in the community other than wealthy single-family homeowners guarding their own investment and fighting every effort to build more housing and provide more shelter options.

Roger Valdez is Director of Smart Growth Seattle, an advocacy organization for more housing supply, choice, and opportunity in Seattle.