

Olympia prepares to open tent site, tiny homes amid rising number of homeless camping

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By

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The Olympian

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Starting Dec. 3, crews will begin work on what is being called a mitigation site on a city-owned parking lot at Olympia Avenue Northeast and Franklin Street Northeast where dozens of people are already camping in tents. Once completed, the site will have toilets, running water and garbage collection. People staying there will be given new tents and pallets to get them off the ground.

The idea for such a site came after the number of tents in downtown Olympia topped 250 in October, up from just a few dozen this summer. Meanwhile, the city stopped enforcing its ban on camping on city-owned property downtown in response to a federal-court decision that said cities can't prosecute people for sleeping on public property when they have nowhere else to go.

The campsite is expected to open around Dec. 10 at a price of about \$100,000.

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While crews ready the site, there may be more people camping on a nearby parking lot on State Avenue Northeast and nearby sidewalks, said Colin DeForrest, the city's homeless response coordinator.

DeForrest said he doesn't expect the site to fill up immediately; as long as there is space for people to move in, city crews could clear homeless camps elsewhere.

The city is looking to open a second mitigation site, ideally outside of downtown, DeForrest said.

"I think there's something to be said for trying to somewhat decentralize the large number of tents downtown," he said.

He added Olympia officials are open to having it in Lacey, Tumwater or unincorporated Thurston County, but as of earlier this week, local leaders had not offered up such a site.

In January, the city plans to open a tiny-house village for about 40 people on land it owns at 830 Union Ave. S.E. behind the Yashiro Japanese Garden.

In addition to tiny homes — each about 8 feet by 12 feet with electricity, heat and a lockable door — the village will have a communal kitchen, meeting space, bathrooms, showers, laundry, on-site security and staff to connect residents with housing, employment, health care and other services.

The city will contract with Seattle-based Low Income Housing Institute, which has developed similar facilities in Seattle, to run it. The city's agreement with LIHI says the nonprofit will work