

## Mayor confronted on Newark homeless issue after council meeting

**Kent Mallett**, Newark Advocate    Published 1:57 p.m. ET April 17, 2019

NEWARK – Frustration over Newark's homeless problem dominated Monday night's City Council meeting and continued well after it ended when citizens confronted the mayor about his administration's response to homeless camps in the city.

Mitchell Boden, who said he was homeless in the 1990s and again for all of 2015, spoke during the meeting, summed up the feelings of several speakers.

"Two shelters simply can't meet the homeless that live here," Boden said. "Because of the number of beds and the rules at shelters, the shelters are not designed to handle entire families. Their mostly for individuals. We have a lot of homeless families.

"Please do something to help the homeless in our city. Homelessness is a serious problem. It won't go away simply because we ignore it."

Members of the Newark Think Tank on Poverty said they feel left out of discussions on the topic, and were frustrated Mayor Jeff Hall did not comment on the issue during the meeting, which included about a dozen speakers upset with the city administration.

So, following the meeting, they went to the mayor to express their opinions directly, prompting an informal 30-minute debate in council chambers.

The mayor said the problem frustrates him, as well, but it's not an issue that has any easy solution. He said city officials are talking to non-profit leaders to come up with answers, but no solutions have yet emerged.

Lesha Farias, a founding member of the Newark Think Tank on Poverty, asked why Think Tank members are not invited to the meetings. The mayor said he doesn't run the meetings.

"I'm not in charge of this," Hall said. "It's the non-profits. When a group gets too big, nothing gets done. I don't have the answers. I'm reaching to the great non-profits in our community for those answers."

Farias responded, "You could ask for representatives from each of these grassroots groups. All you have to do is make a phone call. That's the power that you have. We don't have that power. We want a voice."

In response to a comment that, "You don't do anything," Hall answered, "You don't know what we do and don't do all day. There's a lot of accusations out there."

Donna Gibson told the mayor, "I'm just saying, let us sit down and let's start working on something. We've got to give people some kind of hope. It's just really hard to go down the road and see people with all their belongings in that bag and see them crying."

The mayor and Safety Director Steve Baum said a homeless camp was removed from South Pine Street after a complaint from Modern Welding. The camp was on a brownfield site, which had been contaminated.

"It's not a great place for people to be camping out," Hall said. "We hate to relocate people, but there's some undesirable spots too they shouldn't be at."

Baum said the city does not remove homeless from camps until they get a complaint.

"The most recent camp, (Police Chief) Barry Connell was aware of it months ago," Baum said. "Months ago. Until the police department got a complaint, they didn't address it. Once they get a complaint, they have to."

The call for tent cities presents new problems, Councilman Jeff Rath, R-3rd Ward, said.

"You can't take an abandoned lot because that lot belongs to somebody," Rath said. "You can't just squat on somebody's property. If you put it on a city lot, then the city is now liable for everything that happens there. And, we don't have the resources."

The mayor said he is willing to look at what other similar-size cities have done, but added, "A tent city would not be free. I want you to understand that. You're talking about bathroom facilities, You're talking about trash removal. It's not free.

"We represent the taxpayers' dollars ... I'm saying we don't just willy nilly spend money. We have to do it the right way. I'm not saying it's a reason not to, I'm just saying, you've got to work out the details."

City Councilman Jeremy Blake, D-2nd Ward, a mayoral candidate, said immediate action is needed.

"City government can be a leader in bringing groups together," Blake said. "That's been done in Licking County and Newark in the past. That's something we need to do with some urgency. Tent cities, it's not an unreasonable request, but we need to bring some urgency to it."

The mayor suggested land outside the city limits would be better because it would involve fewer laws and rules, and the zoning is more open. But, he said the issue of sanitary conditions would remain.

The mayor said the residents are not the only ones who feel passionate about finding answers for the homeless population.

"My most frustrating thing being a mayor is not being able to solve the problems, some of them," Hall said. "And, maybe not as quick as we could. Some of them you can't. There are money limitations, rules limitations, there's laws, there's all sort of things. We solve some problems, some are very frustrating.

"And, that's the most frustrating thing for me. I don't sleep at night well. I'm up every couple hours worried about solving things around here, trying to get things done."

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