

Occupy protest deal scuttled

Plaza protesters step in after housing offered to island campers

BY JEN GERSON, CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 3, 2011

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Olympic Plaza protesters derailed talks to end one of the Occupy Calgary camps on Wednesday.

The Occupy protest has been split into two camps since its first march in midOctober: One group has been camping in Olympic Plaza, while another faction remains in Centenary Park on St. Patrick's Island.

While the Occupy movement's concerns generally revolve around inequality, the group on the island has focused on access to affordable housing as most of the protesters there are homeless. Some have medical problems and can't work, others are recovering from addiction or unable to meet rent on disability cheques.

To that end, Calgary Homeless Foundation CEO Tim Richter sat with the campers on St. Patrick's Island for about two hours Wednesday morning. He offered immediate outreach and a referral for future permanent housing to the people on the island, provided they vacate the site by Friday.

However, the proposal was rejected by a group of people who travelled to the site from the movement's other location at Olympic Plaza.

The protesters from that faction said they were not homeless.

They said homelessness was among several systemic problems the movement was trying to address.

They rejected the foundation's offer as a Band-Aid solution and insisted they had the skills and wherewithal to survive the winter outdoors.

"The guys from Olympic Plaza put the kibosh on things," Richter said. "I was a little frustrated, to be perfectly frank. I think it's pretty easy for people who have a couple of hundred dollars worth of Mountain Equipment Co-op gear to say they're going to stay out all winter. To me, it's pretty rich for someone (like that) to tell a guy who's been homeless for 10 years, or a woman who is homeless while she has medical problems, or a woman who is homeless and has kids in foster care, that sleeping outside in the winter is OK because we gotta stay with a global cause. I think that's a little ridiculous."

At times, tensions rose between the Olympic Plaza protesters and former mayoral candidate Paul Hughes, who has used the movement to advocate for better conditions for the chronically homeless in

the park. Both sides yelled, swore and claimed the other was out of order on matters of procedure and purpose.

"It's caused a major rift," Hughes said, adding he hoped his group would separate from the Olympic Plaza bloc. "Their reality and our reality, ours is a lot more real than theirs."

Several of the homeless protesters stated they would rather sleep outside than go back to the city's emergency shelters.

Richter acknowledged the city's shelters "suck," but were a better alternative to sleeping outdoors.

Meanwhile, the Occupy Calgary protesters were enticing homeless people to continue their camp on St. Patrick's Island by creating vague demands for community and social equality that could not be met, Richter said.

"They are putting the same vulnerable people they purport to speak on behalf of, they are putting them in danger," he said. "Now they are going to stay in this situation because of these elevated expectations."

At city hall, political pressure continues to build against the protesters in Olympic Plaza. A petition to evict the campers has accrued more than 600 signatures. Former Ward 7 aldermanic candidate Merle Terlesky started a Facebook group on Wednesday encouraging Calgarians to call the mayor's office.

Ward 13 Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart also has plans to table an urgent motion on the occupation when council resumes on Monday.

The city has claimed \$40,000 worth of damage to the square due to the ongoing protest. As well, the group has been present during Muslim Heritage Day and a gathering of food trucks.

Otherwise, Tom Sampson, deputy chief with the Calgary Emergency Management Agency, said Wednesday continued to be quiet. "It's safe to say we won't be discussing tactics in the media, but we continue to explore all our avenues," he said.

On the island, one of the homeless protesters named Meghan Oxley said she preferred to stay in the camp because she had been abandoned and mistreated at other Calgary homeless facilities. Living outside was not much better - she was beaten by someone wearing steel-toed boots while sleeping in a tent.

"I'm here in this camp because these people are all I have. I trust the people here," she said, while breaking into tears in front of the fire. "This is my family now."

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