

Editorial: Lifting the camping ban without a plan was a failure, but Prop B won't help

By American-Statesman Editorial Board

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Cities have long grappled with homelessness. But in this moment in Austin — with tents lining the breezy shoreline of Lady Bird Lake, with burgeoning encampments spilling out from highway underpasses and popping up closer to neighborhoods, with the public safety hazards measured in charred structures and frostbitten, amputated feet — homelessness is the consummate crisis.

Austin's last point-in-time count put the homeless population around 2,500, a number that has surely grown over the past year. Many of those folks live in desperate conditions in our public spaces.

It is inhumane. It is untenable.

A city as prosperous as Austin must do better.

Austin voters will be asked May 1 to take action with Proposition B, a measure that would reinstate the city's ban on homeless camping. Normally the American-Statesman Editorial Board takes a position on city ballot issues.

But we cannot, in good conscience, endorse Prop B.

Nor can we defend the status quo and Austin's failed efforts to address homelessness since lifting the camping ban.

Homelessness does not get resolved at the ballot box — or at the state Capitol, for that matter — with camping bans. It does not get resolved by police officers writing tickets. And, as we have seen, it does not get resolved at City Hall if officials focus only on long-term housing goals and ignore the critical question of where people should sleep tonight when they have no other place to go. Austin is woefully short of the shelter beds, housing units, mental health services, substance abuse treatment and other services needed by people now on the streets.

Our city faces a defining moment. “We’re truly in what I consider to be an emergency situation in our community,” Council Member Ann Kitchen said at a meeting this month, as the City Council discussed its latest plan to provide housing to people in four of the most visible encampments.

Pass or fail, Prop B doesn’t change their dire need for help.

Failing to meet the challenge

We are nearly two years into a failed experiment in how Austin handles homelessness.

The City Council voted in June 2019 to end citations for camping, panhandling or sleeping on downtown sidewalks, noting the tickets led to unpaid fines and arrest warrants that only made it harder for people to land jobs or stable housing. Austin police issued 18,000 citations for such violations from 2014 to 2016, and eventually got many people to move along without writing a ticket.

Ending those citations was the right thing to do. But allowing camping in most public spaces has been a disaster. Instead of increasing emergency shelter beds or providing designated campsites with restrooms and other basic amenities, the city left many homeless people to live pretty much anywhere.

Hundreds are living dangerously close to roads. Some of them, trying to keep warm or cook food, have started campfires that turned into destructive blazes. A few suffered frostbite during the February winter storm, losing parts of their hands or entire feet.

Visitors have described aggressive panhandling that made them uncomfortable to be downtown. People visiting city parks or the Butler Hike and Bike Trail find homeless people living there, even though city rules prohibit it. Mindful of containing the spread of COVID-19, Austin officials have let homeless encampments stay put during the pandemic, as federal health experts advised.

To the frustration of many, city officials have shrugged off the central question of where homeless people should stay right now. They have focused solely on the unrealistic goal of placing each homeless person directly into housing. Such a plan will take months for some, years for others.

A consultant last year said Austin needs to add 6,370 rapid rehousing or permanent supportive housing units, a more than fourfold increase over the current supply. That same report found Austin has only a third of the

emergency homeless shelter beds the city needs — and that was before COVID-19 forced shelters to temporarily reduce their capacity to accommodate social distancing.

We recognize important work is being done. Various agencies helped 1,879 homeless people move into housing last year, according to the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition, better known as ECHO. Roughly 13,000 households last year received rent assistance, eviction prevention services or other help from city-funded programs designed to keep people from losing their homes. The city has bought two hotels — and is finalizing the purchase of two more — to start adding a few hundred of the badly needed housing units.

Still, Mayor Steve Adler acknowledged in a recent call with reporters, “everything that we’re doing is not up to the challenge that we face.”

Where should they go?

Save Austin Now, the political organization that placed Prop B on the ballot, argues that bringing back the camping ban would force everyone’s hand: It would force city officials to develop more emergency assistance, and it would force those who are homeless to accept the help.

But nothing in Prop B compels the city to add resources. It simply allows police officers to write citations to people who can’t afford to stay anywhere else, at a time when shelters and housing programs already have long waiting lists. Such citations could invite legal challenges: Courts in other jurisdictions have ruled cities cannot enforce a camping ban if there is nowhere else for people to go.

“They don’t want us over here, they don’t want us over there,” Luke White told us while grabbing breakfast at Sunrise Community Church in South Austin. He’s a day laborer who has spent most of the past 15 years living on the street. “Where do they want us to go? It’s not like we can just walk into the Hyatt.”

Waiting lists already swell with people who want help. According to the database used by local service providers for homeless people, more than 9,500 people requested assistance at some point last year while experiencing a period of homelessness or coming to the brink of it. Nearly 2,400 of them said they were experiencing homelessness for the first time. Some received aid or found another way back into housing. Others did not.

The need for affordable housing alone is staggering. Walter Moreau, executive director of the nonprofit Foundation Communities, points to the recently

opened Waterloo Terrace complex, which has apartments and support services for low-income, single adults. “We’ve had over 1,300 people apply for those 132 apartments — that’s 10 applicants for every single apartment,” he recently told reporters. “It’s really overwhelming.”

A recent study found the Austin metro area needs to add 70,000 housing units for those who make less than half of the median household income. But limited resources are not the only problem, said Chris Baker, founder and executive director of The Other Ones Foundation, the nonprofit overseeing the homeless campsite in Southeast Austin on state land Gov. Greg Abbott provided two years ago.

“We’ve seen, not once but many times ... people who have a (housing) voucher, who have case management, who have housing navigation, and they’re still not able to get into places because of rental history or criminal history,” Baker recently told reporters. Often those crimes were tied to substance use disorders or living on the street, a maddening cycle that keeps people from accessing the housing they need.

White told us a nonprofit helped him get an apartment, but he lost it a few months ago. He said he struggles with drinking.

“I put myself back here,” said White, who sleeps on a makeshift mattress of cardboard not far from the Drag. “I’m not blaming nobody.”

Insist on a better way

As a city we must decide what we want our response to homeless people to look like. It must be a plan that can be clearly communicated to those who need help. It must be backed by sufficient resources and tied to reasonable timelines. It must connect people to the various support services they need. And it must honor the expectation that public spaces should be safe and usable for everyone.

Prop B does not advance such a plan. But Austin officials must recognize that their failure to develop and communicate that vision lit the fire for Prop B. The city’s delays in hiring a homeless strategy officer, the abruptly dropped plans to develop a South Austin shelter and the refusal to engage with community groups exploring tent solutions all shook the public’s confidence that the city had a handle on the situation.

Efforts like the newly developed HEAL initiative, a council-backed program to connect people in certain encampments to housing, are welcome. But they were needed two years ago.

A recent summit involving officials from ECHO, the Downtown Austin Alliance, the Austin Chamber of Commerce, the city and various nonprofits announced a goal Thursday to house 3,000 homeless people in three years, starting with the first 100 by June. It's a laudable push. But this effort also was needed a couple of years ago, before the city rushed into lifting the camping ban.

A community cannot turn back the clock, as Prop B asks voters to do. The conditions on our streets are shameful, but sweeping people back into the woods where they are not easily seen will not fix the problem. Austin can do better. We all must insist on it.