



Seattle Human Rights Commission

1963 – 2015 · 52 years of championing human rights and fostering a just future

April 15, 2016

Roger Millar
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Transmitted by email to: MillarR@wsdot.wa.gov

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Dear Secretary Millar:

We, the Seattle Human Rights Commission (the Commission), write to urge the Washington State Department of Transportation (the WSDOT) to use the \$1 million earmarked by the State Legislature to protect the human rights of individuals residing in the area bordering I-5 known as “the Jungle” by investing in social services and sanitation, rather than a physical barrier around the site. The Commission appreciates the extended discussion to support the WSDOT in formulating a comprehensive strategy.

The Commission believes that spending \$1 million to build a barrier preventing access to the area under I-5 ignores the realities faced by residents of the Jungle. The construction of a fence around the encampment would cause the forced displacement of residents, thereby compounding homeless individuals’ lack of access to shelter. While the Commission understands WSDOT’s obligation to protect public safety and maintain infrastructure, a physical barrier will not deter all residents from seeking shelter under I-5. The Commission echoes the sentiment expressed by Seattle City Councilmembers and community advocates that building a fence is a short sighted reaction to a long-term issue. Such a proposal threatens the human rights and dignity of residents.

The 2016 One Night Count found 2,942 unsheltered individuals in the City and 4,405 unsheltered individuals across King County after shelters were full. We share the belief that the growing human rights crisis of unsheltered homelessness in the City requires immediate and aggressive action. With few other options immediately available and shelters at full capacity, tent encampments can serve a crucial function by meeting basic human survival needs while improving the public safety and health of people who lack access to basic shelter. Authorized tent encampments, while not a permanent solution to homelessness, can help provide safety and reduce risk of harm for several hundred homeless individuals each night.



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On December 10, 2012, the City was declared to be a Human Rights City, committing itself to protect, respect and fulfill the full range of inherent human rights for all, as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and numerous other international human rights instruments. Every individual has internationally-recognized rights to access adequate housing, necessary social services, and security¹. These rights are threatened by Seattle's lack of affordable housing among many other factors which drive the City's homelessness crisis. We urge the WSDOT to protect human rights by using the \$1 million to invest in shelter and social services.

Respectfully,

The Seattle Human Rights Commission

Handwritten signature of Margaret Babayan in black ink.

Margaret Babayan, Co-Chair

Handwritten signature of Marcel Baugh in black ink.

Marcel Baugh, Co-Chair

Handwritten signature of Danielle Wallace in black ink.

Danielle Wallace, Co-Chair

Jason Poydras

Jason Poydras, Economic and Social Rights Task Force

CC:

The Honorable City of Seattle Ed Murray

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Lisa Herbold

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Bruce Harrell

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Kshama Sawant

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Rob Johnson

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Debora Juarez

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Mike O'Brien

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Sally Bagshaw

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Tim Burgess

The Honorable City of Seattle Councilmember Lorena González

¹ See: Article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; Article 5(e)(iii-iv) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; Article 14(f) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women