

Old Northwood Neighborhood Association, Inc.

The Rayner-Hill House
3510 Spruce Avenue
West Palm Beach, Florida 33407

March 10, 2024

VIA EMAIL

Honorable Keith James
Mayor, City of West Palm Beach
401 Clematis Street
West Palm Beach, Florida 33401

RE: Follow-Up to Mayor's Panel on Homelessness-Action Steps

Dear Mayor James,

We write on behalf of the residents of the Old Northwood Historic District ("ONW"). Located north of the City's Downtown, our neighborhood was the first in the City of West Palm Beach to receive historic designation by the State of Florida, on April 14, 1994. ONW contains over 320 historic buildings, and is bounded by North Dixie Highway/Poinsettia Ave., the alleyway just east of Broadway, the alley south of 26th Street, and the alley north of 35th Street. We are a diverse and welcoming community, home to thousands of neighbors of all ages, colors, races, religions, sexual orientations, etc. You have seen and heard from us at many City Commission meetings, property development meetings, via correspondences, etc. We actively support the West Palm Beach Police and Fire Departments with annual fundraising events, stay connected to our City Commissioner, then Honorable Cathleen Ward, and have an active and engaged neighborhood association.

Several of our residents, including the undersigned, attended your panel discussion on homelessness at the Mandel Public Library on Wednesday, February 21, 2024 at 10:00 a.m. Because there was no opportunity for residents to speak at the meeting, and given that many residents were unable to attend on a weekday morning, we wanted to share with you in writing our concerns and proposed actions steps that the City should consider.

During the panel discussion, you twice stated that residents and visitors to the City have contacted you to say that they cannot eat at outdoor cafes on Clematis Street or enjoy the Downtown waterfront without being bothered by homeless people. Mr. Mayor, these two complaints are minor compared to what is happening in ONW. In our neighborhood, we are not concerned about a meal on Clematis; we are instead focused on issues critical to our safety and well being. We are trying to secure our homes from people wandering the neighborhood, clean up garbage that is left by them daily, wipe up human excrement from our fences and yards, protect our kids from the mentally ill and criminal element of the homeless population, and evict trespassers from unoccupied homes. In other words, we are now running a gauntlet of homeless people in our every day living activities. We have survived with the beginnings of this situation for years, driving up South Dixie Highway to our homes, picking up prescriptions from the CVS on North Dixie, trying to walk to Currie park, etc. But make no mistake— the situation has gotten much worse in the year or so, especially with the fencing- off of Currie Park. Residents expected this might happen once construction started, and we asked the City to plan accordingly. Clearly, that did not happen.

Here are just a few examples of what has occurred in ONW in only the last few weeks:

Squatters broke into a locked home at 444 29th Street and were living there. Police called.

Squatters broke into a locked home at 412 28th Street and were living there (three times in two weeks). Police called. One of the squatters had a 20- year long rap sheet.

Squatters broke into a locked home at 421 28th Street and were living there. Police called.

2/29, 12:20 a.m., 400 block of 29th St., resident hears moaning and growling, police called. It took 3 police officers to remove and subdue an incoherent male from the roof of the back cottage. Police observed he was “high as a kite”.

500 block of 26th Street, resident had to clean human diarrhea from his back fence and yard.

500 block of 35th Street, squatters in a building on the Broadway alley have repeatedly broken into the owner’s backyard to use water from the hose, since there is no water in the abandoned building they are occupying. They also cut the hose. Police were called.

We want to impress upon you that this is NOT AN EXHAUSTIVE LIST BY ANY MEANS- just a few examples of what we are trying to cope with. These examples are in addition to the “normal” activities many neighbors engaged in previously, like chasing IV drug users and prostitutes out of the alleyways, particularly around 26th-29th streets and the north/south alleyway by Broadway, having packages that were delivered stolen from front steps, etc.

We have not stood idly by and watched this crisis unfold. Individual neighbors have engaged the police department, we met with the former Deputy Chief and his surveillance expert, Lt. Hagan, we bought our own cameras several years ago (which now need replacing but which is too costly a project for us to undertake, after investigating bids), we are advocating for more lighting in our neighborhood, (working through Commissioner Ward on this issue), and we are beginning a volunteer neighborhood watch group. Many of us also engage with groups like The Lord’s Place and others to help the homeless.

But what is the City doing? At the panel discussion, you said several times that you are just “beginning” this conversation now concerning homelessness. Why is it only just beginning, when this challenge has existed for years? Was the city asleep at the wheel and depending on a few non-profits to address the entire problem? We appreciate that you stated you will “continue” the conversation that just “began”, but you stated also that the next conversation will be about “what individuals can do” in their neighborhoods. We are already doing it. What we want is for the City to do its part.

Lest we be seen as complainers who do not also propose solutions, here are some ideas for your consideration:

1. Leverage the dollars that the developers are pouring into WPB to provide funding for services and housing for the homeless. Do this by adopting city policies/ordinances that require developers to contribute to a fund created for this purpose. Do not make it a discretionary fund, or one that allows developers to pay a minor penalty if they fail or refuse to comply. It must be a REQUIREMENT to have developer plans approved by the City. The City can develop a formula for determining the amount of the contribution.

2. Immediately form a Mayor's Task Force on Homelessness charged with producing concrete, fundable recommendations by a date certain (January 1). It should be comprised of representatives of the organizations you had represented on your Panel (including the County), a representative from each impacted neighborhood (particularly those neighborhoods in the north end), representatives from key City offices (budget, zoning, building, police, Code, representatives from each City Commissioner). This should be a real work group that meets weekly and provides you with updates— not just a group that is symbolic.

3. Create an initiative among the City, the Court system, and the organizations that serve the homeless so that there is a mutual understanding and agreement on what is a criminal offense and what is not. At the Panel discussion, you stated that the police cannot arrest the homeless unless there is a bed for them available. We think this is a misstatement of the law. Police can arrest the homeless if they break a law (for ex., burglary, breaking and entering, trespassing, assault, battery, etc), even if there is no bed available. But they cannot be arrested simply because of their status—i.e., that they are homeless. The laws should be vigorously enforced, and the courts need to connect with the police and non-profits rather than just releasing to the street the homeless that are arrested for committing crimes.

4. Network with other cities with similar demographics as our City to learn best practices and then copy them. We understand homelessness is a national challenge. Other cities are struggling with the same issue. Some have made progress. It's the city's job to find these pockets of success, study the failures and successes and duplicate what has worked. Go to conferences, pick up the phone and call counterparts, etc.

5. Use data the Police collect to increase police protection/surveillance. Parking an empty police car at each end of our neighborhood fools no one. We need patrols at random times and random days during the night and early morning hours to get the word out that ONW is off limits.

We are not without empathy for our fellow humans. We want to engage with you and other partners on how to help them. We recognize that it will take many people of good will from different fields to address this challenge. However, in our view, the City, and you as our Mayor, need to recognize we have a crisis in ONW and that you must address it with concrete measures, now.

Sincerely,

Kathy Ahearn

Vice Chair

ONW Steering Committee

Cc: Commissioner Cathleen Ward

Commissioner Shalonda Warren

Commissioner Christy Fox

Commissioner Joseph Peduzzi

Commissioner Christina Lambert

Police Chief Frank Adderley

ONW Steering Committee

ONW Residents