

ODOT clears Salem homeless camp



Salem police officer Bob Owings and state officials stand near a homeless camp under the Highway 22 overpass at Mill Creek on Monday.

Move comes days before Point-in-Time count

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Authorities roused an east Salem homeless camp under a Highway 22 bridge Monday, frustrating advocates who are planning to tally the region's homeless population Wednesday.

Oregon Department of Transportation workers posted signs Jan. 16 under the Mill Creek bridge crossing near Costco and Lowe's, warning the homeless of the impending sweep and to remove their belongings by Jan. 26.

Now, permanent no-camping signs are posted.

Lowe's complained about the homeless camp, which led to the sweep, ODOT spokesman Lou Torres said. A Lowe's assistant store manager declined to comment; a Lowe's spokeswoman did not respond to requests for comment.

Torres said the timing of the sweep just days before the annual homeless count "was just coincidental."

"We're not letting headcounts dictate when we do this," he said. "We don't pay attention to those things."

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Items belonging to the homeless are lined up as the camp is cleared.

PHOTOS BY MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Homeless campers built a makeshift dam to keep their items dry while they stayed under the Highway 22 overpass that crosses Mill Creek near Costco and Lowes.

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Homeless

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During the Point-in-Time count, homeless advocates attempt to quantify the region's homeless population.

Federal officials use the count to award money throughout the country to address homelessness. Last year's count showed 1,151 homeless people living in Marion and Polk counties.

Sweeps so close to the count make pulling it off effectively much more difficult, said Jimmy Jones, director of the Mid-Willamette Valley Community Action Agency's ARCHES project.

Advocates spend months developing information about where homeless people live, and sweeps push them into other areas, Jones said.

Whenever a camp is cleared out, people become more suspicious of outsiders coming into what amounts to their homes, he said.

Jones said winter is a bad time to do sweeps because many homeless already suffer from chronic health conditions.

ODOT officials don't enjoy doing these sweeps, Torres said, but the department has a responsibility to tend to the cleanliness and safety of areas for which it is responsible.

Pollution, like feces getting into the water, was a chief concern at the Mill Creek camp, where about 100 people were living.

Everything from bike parts to car seats to what looked to be a storage shed were spread along the dirt at the camp Monday.

Salem police officer Bob Owings, who was assisting ODOT, estimates he's been to the camp more than a dozen times. He regularly responds to problems in Cascades Gateway Park, Walmart and Lowes.

A number of riding lawn mowers were stolen recently from Lowes, and one was recently found at the camp, he said.

The homeless sometimes light fires to stay warm. Owings pointed out what appeared to be scorch marks on the underside of the bridge.

Torres said smoke from fires can be a distraction for passing drivers and limit visibility.

To block part of Mill Creek on the south side of camp, those living there improvised a dam from dirt, rocks, wooden pallets, a tarp and makeshift sandbags made from Walmart grocery bags and dirt.

Owings figured the dam gave them some more real estate.

But Herman, one of the camp residents who asked to be identified by his first name only, red back. "When the rain came, we were about to get flooded out."

Their belongings were at risk of being washed away, he said. "So we built that to try to save our stuff. That's what it was," he said.

Herman said he has been homeless for about a year and a half. He said he would be working but he broke his wrist, which needs surgery. He and his girlfriend live on government food benefits.

"I would love to work," he said. "I'd rather be working than living down here."

He and the others who had been living under the bridge will be out in the elements, Herman said. "It is what it is. We're going to survive."

Torres said officials will hold onto people's personal belongings at a maintenance facility on Airport Road SE for 30 days and allow them to collect it.

ODOT had plans Monday to post warnings for two upcoming sweeps near where Commercial Street SE turns into Interstate 5 and where Interstate 5 crosses Delaney Road SE.

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