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TO: Deputy Mayor Hale and Assembly Committee of the Whole

DATE: March 11, 2024

FROM: Robert Barr, Deputy City Manager

RE: Cold Weather Emergency Shelter and Mill Campground Update

We are in year one of a five-year Title 49 exemption passed by the Assembly last fall for the operation of the Cold Weather Emergency Shelter (CWES) in Thane, on the Rock Dump (Ordinance 2023-39).

### **Operations – CWES**

The CWES has been operating successfully, with challenges, nightly since October 20<sup>th</sup>. St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is our operator. From when the shelter opened, we have averaged 41 clients per night (9.2 standard deviation). Usage has been increasing. Since January 1<sup>st</sup>, we have averaged 50 clients per night (5.1 SD). Our contract with SVdP envisions a typical year, where we end CWES operations on or around April 15<sup>th</sup>. Preliminarily, we anticipate a contract extension with SVdP for next winter.

SVdP reports the following operational challenges:

- Staff safety – this population is more likely to be comprised of individuals that other agencies will not serve, usually due to behavioral/safety reasons. SVdP mitigates this risk through training and CBJ staff assist by making physical changes to the space and providing emergency services.
- Interagency capacity – information sharing is significantly better, but all agencies are stressed from a capacity perspective.
- New costs – local laundromats changed ownership, costs for blanket laundry increased dramatically. Food expenses are higher than expected as some individuals are not permitted at other shelters.
- Concern about what happens when the CWES closes.

### **Expenses and Revenue – CWES**

CWES operations cost approximately \$250,000 per season in contractual expenses, plus internal costs associated with facility maintenance and utilities. In the current fiscal year, internal costs will be approximately \$55,000. If this service remains at our Thane location, internal labor costs will decrease in future years – a significant portion was due to start-up work. In FY24, approximately \$132,000 of these expenses are being paid for by the Healthy & Equitable Communities grant from the State of Alaska, Division of Public Health. We do not believe this grant will be available in future years. Other grants or alternative funding sources that could partially fund these services may

be available, which staff will explore. One option for partial funding will likely include opioid settlement funds.

Separate from the above numbers, we plan on an interior plumbing and restroom project once the ground thaws this spring for future seasons, which we estimate at \$50,000.

### **Operations – Mill Campground**

For many years now<sup>1</sup>, CBJ has been operating a campground in the Thane area, mostly during the summer and shoulder seasons, for transient summer workers and people experiencing homelessness (PEH) without better/alternative housing options. Since shortly after inception, the focus of the campground has been on the PEH population.

Worth noting, operation of the campground has not been without personal risk for the campers and legal risk for the public. In 2018, the Alaska Supreme Court found the CBJ likely liable for the criminal actions of a camper – a shooting that resulted in a major injury – due to CBJ having had a camp caretaker in place<sup>2</sup>. Chief Justice Stowers’ dissent briefly characterizes the risk analysis CBJ has been utilizing since:

“There is an adage that no good deed goes unpunished...under this rule, no rational policymaker would ever make the decision the City made here<sup>3</sup> because there is simply no way to cut off the City’s potential for vicarious liability involving social interaction without expensive and time-consuming litigation that takes public resources from other public needs.”

The campground has since been a facility with limited services provided by the Parks & Recreation Department with oversight for some years from the former Housing Officer and currently from the Deputy City Manager. Services provided include garbage and potable water hauling, restrooms, platform maintenance, sharps collections, and end of season clean-up.

The overall tenor of the campground has been deteriorating over the past couple of years. Neighborhood complaints have increased along with apparent criminal activity – drug related activity, transactional sex, vandalism, thefts, garbage dumping, threatening behavior. The neighborhood at the end of Gastineau Ave was particularly impacted last year and had a series of meetings with staff at JPD and the Manager’s Office to discuss mitigating impacts. We collected 74 tons of solid waste over the season (roughly the equivalent of 41 cars) and 19 gallons of sharps.

We lease Mill Campground (and previously leased Thane Campground) from AELP, who continues to be an engaged and willing partner. However, last season some of the campers cut and burned AELP transmission poles, which is a bright line issue for the utility and community. For these reasons, we believe we need an alternative to Mill Campground this year.

### **Expenses – Mill Campground**

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<sup>1</sup> In research for this memo, the earliest reference found on this topic was a memo from Deputy City Manager Donna Pierce, April 8, 1998, discussing a meeting between Bill Corbus and Mayor Dennis Egan that resulted in a staff proposal for a fee-based campground on AELP/AJT property. AELP remains a partner to-date.

<sup>2</sup> Lane v City of Juneau, 421 P.3d 83 (Alaska 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Staffing the campground with a caretaker – another camper – with general communication and social interaction responsibilities.

Not counting staff time associated with JPD and CCFR, Mill Campground costs approximately \$70,000 per year to operate. Most of these costs are related to clean-up and garbage removal. A small portion is tied to restrooms (portable sanitation units) and general materials and commodities (e.g. sharps containers).

The one-time costs associated with moving the campground to a new location (one of the options below) are approximately \$110,000.

## **Discussion**

Juneau is not alone in seeing increased demand for services for people experiencing homelessness. The national data on homelessness<sup>4</sup> is imperfect and challenging; however, sources generally agree that:

- Rates of homelessness have been increasing in most places, annually.
- The impact of homelessness is disproportionate with people of color being overrepresented.
- Nationally (and in Juneau<sup>5</sup>) service providers have been expanding the availability of both temporary and permanent beds, but the resources still fall short of meeting need.

While an analysis of the reasons for these trends is outside of the scope of this memo, some seem clear: Income inequality is high<sup>6</sup>. The housing market continues to outpace inflation<sup>7</sup>. Mental and behavioral health services that used to be provided at the federal and state levels have been reduced or eliminated and local police and hospital emergency departments are commonly the agencies of last resort.

Options, in order of staff recommendation, include:

- 1) Move the Mill Campground to a more visible, easier to service location and provide a similar scope of services. A parcel roughly of equal size to the Mill Campground exists at the corner of Thane Rd and Mill St, immediately adjacent to the CWES.
  - a. This option requires AELP consent and a negotiated lease, which we believe possible.
  - b. This option makes it easier for P&R staff to provide typical services and would enable us to conduct additional clean-up activities (rather than one large clean-up at the end of the season) due to easy road access.
  - c. This option is significantly more visible, which presents benefits and challenges. Some clients will favor the additional visibility, and some will not. Some of those who do not will choose to camp elsewhere on their own.
  - d. Public impact and opinion will be broader, although the deeper and specific impacts on the Gastineau Ave neighborhood should be sharply reduced.

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<sup>4</sup> US Interagency Council on Homelessness: <https://www.usich.gov/guidance-reports-data/data-trends>  
National Alliance to End Homelessness: <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness/>

<sup>5</sup> CBJ spending alone has increased from under \$500k in FY13 to over \$5M in FY24. Ref: 10/23/23 Assembly COW Packet.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/income-inequality.html>; <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://live.laborstats.alaska.gov/housing/alaska-sales-price.html>; <https://live.laborstats.alaska.gov/trends-magazine/2023/September/alaska-rental-market>

- e. Some of those deeper/specific impacts will instead be felt by the new neighbors in the Rock Dump area, which is a business/commercial area, and includes the CBJ. This group has not yet had an opportunity to publicly comment on this concept.
  - f. Thefts and break-ins have occurred in the Rock Dump area at an increased rate since the establishment of the CWES. There's no reason to expect this to abate and it may increase or decrease with the campground. JPD has been effective on this front and some property has been recovered, but it remains a challenge.
  - g. It will be easier to manage garbage bears at this site.
  - h. It will be easier for wrap-around service providers – mobile health clinic, navigators, emergency responders – to access this site. The Glory Hall is committed to coordinating wrap-around services.
  - i. This is close to a status quo option – the pros and cons of addressing this broader issue through a concentrated structure (e.g. a sanctioned campground) continue.
- 2) Discontinue sanctioned campground services, support CWES clients through navigator services and connections to CBJ/JCF supported social services agencies.
- a. Despite growth in permanent supportive housing beds and the coming of Housing First phase 3, local provider capacity will not meet demand, which means this option amounts to deciding on a dispersed rather than concentrated camping strategy (nb: dispersed camping happens in any scenario, the prevalence and impact is greatest in this one).
  - b. Illegal camping on public and private property will increase in the number of total camps. Operationally, like other governments with enforcement responsibilities, CBJ would tolerate illegal camping on public property until safety concerns and/or the impediment of typical public use reach a subjective critical point, at which point camps would be closed, cleaned up, navigator services provided as much as possible, and another camp would pop up elsewhere.
  - c. This option is likely to be safer for some individuals (smaller camps are generally quieter camps) and less safe for others (more camps and camps in harder to reach areas make it take longer for emergency services to respond). Given that dispersed camps happen anyway, having a sanctioned campground enables individuals to choose where they feel safest.
  - d. Projecting costs for this option is challenging. We would expect increased costs in smaller camp and remote site clean-ups. Whether those costs would exceed those of Option 1 is unknown.
- 3) Operate Mill Campground – same as last year
- a. This is not a staff preferred option and seems to be the highest risk option given experience. It may be feasible with the addition of new costs and planning to secure AELP infrastructure.
- 4) Operate the CWES year-round
- a. Our existing social service agencies with staff trained to operate the CWES do not have capacity to perform this work year-round.
  - b. It is likely that many current CWES clients would not use a summer CWES service due to the rules required at the CWES – we would likely see more of the impacts

associated with a dispersed camping strategy and may end up deciding we need a year-round CWES and a sanctioned campground.

- c. If this option were possible, it would be at a high cost due to the lack of existing capacity among existing providers.

### **Recommendation**

Direct staff to enter into negotiations with AELP for the use of their property at Thane Rd and Mill St for a summer campground.

Direct staff to prepare a non-code ordinance for introduction at the next regular Assembly meeting authorizing the use of said property in line with Option 1 in this memo and to care for public notice to the community broadly and the neighboring property owners directly.