June 24, 2022

The Honorable Dave Bronson
Mayor, Municipality of Anchorage
632 W 6th Avenue
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dear Mayor Bronson:

We are writing to express serious concern with your administration’s decision to unilaterally close the Centennial Campground at Centennial Park and instead use it as a campsite for people experiencing homelessness. We are deeply concerned that such a drastic step was taken without any notice or consultation with the Northeast Community Council. Had your administration provided notice to the public and consulted with the Northeast Community Council, you would have learned that there are numerous reasons why Centennial Park is an inappropriate location for locating a homeless campsite. While it is vitally important to address homelessness in Anchorage, this plan would create an unsafe environment for both campers and nearby residents.

The Northeast Community Council has long advocated for improving Centennial Park and Centennial Campground. In 2010, the Alaska Legislature approved a $500,000 grant for improving Centennial Park which was used to upgrade the campground. The Northeast Community Council requested this funding after the 2006 Anchorage Bowl Parks plan identified a deficiency in community use park facilities in the Northeast Community Council area. Closing Centennial Campground to the public would exacerbate this deficiency.

Camping space is limited at Centennial Campground, with only 84 campsites available and only 44 of these are designed to accommodate tent camping. The remaining sites are designed solely for RV camping. Since there has been no public announcement other than a paper posted at Centennial Park stating that the campground was being “repurposed,” it is not clear how exactly the campground is now being managed or who is being allowed to camp there.

We understand that Mayor’s Office staff have informed nonprofits that there will be a voucher system where people experiencing homelessness can receive a voucher for a campsite at Centennial Campground, but we have also learned that residents at the Sullivan Arena mass shelter have been given a handout stating that “camping is allowed at Centennial (Hmong) Park as of yesterday” and offering transportation to the park without any mention of needing a voucher. It is likely that more people will arrive at Centennial Campground expecting to be able to camp than there are spaces available leading to illegal camping in Centennial Park. Given the current fire danger in Anchorage, concentrating campers in Centennial Park will increase the risk of fire in the park and create an unsafe environment for campers and nearby residents.
Centennial Campground is also a poor location because there are no services for individuals experiencing homelessness nearby. The surrounding area is mostly residential, and campers would have to walk along Boundary Avenue to Muldoon Road to access public transportation. The only nearby service for those experiencing homelessness is the Safe Harbor Muldoon hotel, but this facility only serves its residents and does not have the capacity to be a day shelter for nonresidents.

Another serious flaw in this plan to operate Centennial Campground as a homeless campsite is that Anchorage Municipal Code of Regulations 25.10.007 prohibits camping in a municipal campsite for more than 7 days. It is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that all residents would be able to transition into stable housing within 7 days and the Municipality would be forced to either ignore the law and allow them to remain or to evict them from the campground into a neighborhood that does not have supportive services available. Further, AMCR 25.10.003 requires the director of parks and recreation to issue written findings before closing an area to the public and it is unclear whether any such findings were issued before closing Centennial Campground.

We urge you to immediately reconsider and cancel the plan to turn Centennial Campground into a campsite for people experiencing homelessness and to engage with the Northeast Community Council and East Anchorage community leaders before making any changes to neighborhood parks in the future. Had your administration engaged with the affected community, these fatal flaws in this plan would have come to light and we could have worked together constructively to find solutions to better address the problem of homelessness in our community.

Sincerely,

Senator Bill Wielechowski

Forrest Dunbar

Assemblymember Forrest Dunbar

Assemblymember Pete Petersen