



## **Statement for Mayor Biskupski's Public Hearing on the Proposed Closure of Rio Grande Street - September 6, 2017**

We have a number of concerns regarding the closure of Rio Grande St. Two years ago we recommended the closure of Rio Grande to vehicles. Unfortunately, in the current context of Operation Rio Grande this idea has become problematic.

Discussion around the creation of a "safe space" on Rio Grande is being coupled with the development of a new ID system that will restrict access to this area. Apparently, people will now need a special state issued ID to be homeless. We should be helping people secure real state ID's and drivers licenses in an expedited manner. Any service provider or homeless person can tell you how important having proper ID is for any number of reasons. We'd like to see government resources put into helping people get ID's they can use for something besides merely being homeless. Instead we are faced with the prospect of bar-coded, picture ID's with thumb prints on file that are no good for anything except accessing a small area of one street in Salt Lake City.

The answer to homelessness is housing - plentiful low income housing in a variety of configurations. We believe that the creation of three new shelters with a combined total of 400 fewer beds than currently exist is a mistake. There is no reason to believe that the number of homeless people will decline in the near future, especially without significant new low income housing options. In fact, our view is that homelessness is likely to increase, and limiting access to shelter is dangerous to human life.

Closing the low barrier, downtown shelter we have means more people on the street with nowhere to go. Talk of closing the St. Vincent DePaul soup kitchen is also troubling, as the new shelters are designed to be self-contained. Far more people are seeking assistance with hot meals than will be residents of these new facilities.

Operation Rio Grande has already had a significant impact on adjacent low income neighborhoods like Poplar Grove. Pushing homeless people into hiding for the benefit of one neighborhood at the expense of others is not a solution. It is telling that there is no mention of housing in the three phases of Operation Rio Grande. So far we have a law enforcement strategy to answer what is primarily a human services problem.

Homeless people have civil rights. This seems to be getting lost in the ongoing hysteria that has become Operation Rio Grande. Adding an unconstitutional ID requirement in order to be considered a "worthy" homeless person is moving in the wrong direction. The new ID system will also have the capability of pinging law enforcement databases. The danger in the current discussion about closing Rio Grande is that we are creating a containment area for homeless people and planning to crack down on anyone in the area who refuses to comply and sign up to use it. As long as the closure of Rio Grande is coupled with the de facto incarceration of homeless people, we must oppose it.

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