

**Minutes of the joint meeting of the Cow Pasture Stewardship
Committee and the Homelessness Task Force**

**June 5, 2023, 5:00 PM
City Council Chambers**

Members in attendance from the Cow Pasture Stewardship Committee: Chris Russo-Fraysier (Chair), Tim Rapczynski, Janette Shaffer, Susan McDowell

Members in attendance from the Homelessness Task Force: Ericka Reil (Chair), Steven Finner, Miriam Ben-Dor, Chip Castle, Phil Moros

City Staff in attendance: City Manager Nicolas Storellicastro, Police Chief Brad Vail, Fire Chief Keith Cushman, Planning, Permitting & Assessing Services Director Janet Shatney, Deputy Fire Chief Joe Aldsworth, and Permit Administrator Michelle La Barge-Burke

Ericka Reil called the Homelessness Task Force to order. Chris Russo-Fraysier called the Cow Pasture Stewardship Committee to order. Michael Hellein said he would not call the Planning Commission to order. As a result, the Planning Commission did not participate in this meeting.

Manager Storellicastro provided an overview of the scale of the homeless situation that Barre is responding to. As of the date of the meeting, 302 adults and 85 children were at risk of losing housing. The first wave of exits started on June 1. Subsequent waves would occur in July.

The Manager described the barriers to camping in Barre City, including ordinance, deeds, and management plans that restrict overnight camping in the areas of the City most suitable for camping. The Manager posed the following question for feedback from the Task Force, Committee and members of the public:

- Is there City and/or State property that the City Council should consider for designation for overnight encampments?
- Are there locations the City could install temporary showers, portable toilets, and ice machines?

Ericka Reil spoke and explained this is the work she does, and she spoke of looking for places for people to safely camp at night.

Chris Russo-Fraysier spoke about the history of the Cow Pasture Stewardship Committee and spoke of her advocacy for the space, and the history of the Management Plan, which prohibits camping in the Cow Pasture.

Miriam Ben-Dor asked if the Cow Pasture is usable for camping and the Manager responded that the Management Plan prohibits camping in the Cow Pasture.

Chip Castle suggested use of the BOR parking lot. The Manager responded that the City prefers to focus on use of the BOR as a congregate shelter as has been discussed and proposed to the state.

Tim Rapczynski spoke and mentioned the old grove trees in the Cow Pasture as another consideration for not allowing camping.

Janette Shaffer spoke and said car may be the only place for people to store belongings so access to vehicles should be considered if any areas are designated for camping.

Phil Moros spoke and asked if the City is constrained to a single site. The Manager said not necessarily. He also asked if there has been an uptick in camping since the first wave of evictions. The Manager said one site was reported in Canales Woods, and those individuals were asked to relocate due to the deed restrictions on the site. Mr. Moros said that the camping location should be downtown near services and churches.

Susan McDowell spoke and suggested the BOR parking lot for portable toilets, showers and picnic tables.

The meeting then turned to public comment.

Former City Manager Steve Mackenzie spoke and said he would not support camping in the Cow Pasture.

An individual who did not provide her name spoke in opposition to people camping in the City. The Manager asked the individual to stop disparaging homeless individuals.

Denise (last name unclear) spoke and asked if these were temporary solutions. Ericka described that the general assistance program winds back up in November for extreme weather.

Mark Martin suggested use of the dog park. The Manager suggested that some camping may be occurring near there and other areas near the bike path. The Manager said that one of the challenges is whether to formally designate a camping location or to allow people to continue to camp discreetly.

Jan Fortier asked why the state has not done enough to help individuals as they exit the motels. Ericka Reil said that as part of her work she is in the hotels helping people connect to services and there is no time or resources to help those that remain.

Colleen Boyd spoke and said that many in the hotels are veterans, have complex needs, and are hard-working people who have fallen on hard times.

Miriam Ben-Dor spoke and asked if the BOR was still on the table. The Manager said yes. Miriam asked if the Council would change policies for a period of time to “look the other way” on camping. The Manager said that the City does not know of a place to formally designate camping and the current policy of responding only when encampments are brought to the City’s attention may be the best possible solution.

Janette Shaffer asked if the funding the City is receiving is for temporary solutions and asked about continuing use of the motels with state funding. The Manager said that there are agencies working on continued use of the motel rooms.

An unknown speaker asked what the issues are with the BOR. The Manager said that the BOR is open to use of the BOR as a congregate shelter, subject to the state meeting the City’s conditions for use of the site. The Manager also said that he preferred to use of the BOR congregate shelter as opposed to allowing camping in the BOR parking lot because the City would be responsible for oversight and management if the parking lot is used.

Ericka Reil said that even if the BOR is used, there will still be people camping.

Councilor Michael Deering spoke and said he was concerned about the strain on City resources by incorporating 387 individuals leaving the motels and asked about the use of schools as shelter space. Ericka Reil said that it was not expected that the full 387 people would come to Barre. The Manager said the City is focused on use of City sites, and use of the school could be considered but would be a decision of the school district.

Gianni Badeau spoke and said he lives behind the BOR. He stated concerns about dust and trash on the site. He also asked how long the BOR would be used and what would happen when hockey season starts. Mr. Badeau asked about use of the Municipal Auditorium. The Manager responded by saying that use of BOR as a congregate shelter will not impact the hockey season and that the City has told the state that the BOR can only be used through September 1. The Manager also said that this is yet another temporary solution until more housing is built, and that the BOR was chosen over the Auditorium because it is easier to isolate.

Mark Desano spoke and spoke about his wife’s experience with the homeless population. He said the City should not change course on camping policy and said he would do anything to keep his family safe. The Manager said that the City has included conditions in its letter of interest to the state that would preclude sex offenders and dangerous criminals from being housed at the BOR due to proximity to programming and staff.

In addition, the Manager said that while some people may have abused the general assistance program there are also people who desperately need the help and we should keep them in mind as we consider policy.

Miriam Ben-Dor said that she worked at a winter overflow shelter and said that there were no rooms or partitions and that there were only cots. She also said that providers have access to the information of the people they are serving.

Phil Moros asked if the BOR was used if there would be a limit to the number of people it could accommodate. The Manager said that the building can accommodate all 387 but nobody expects that many people to use the shelter.

Ericka Reil suggested downtown on Church Street.

Samantha Hiscock spoke and suggested City Hall Park, the Cow Pasture, and the bike path.

There was agreement that the portable showers would only make sense at the BOR if it is used as a congregate shelter.

An unknown speaker said that she opposed portable toilets at the Cow Pasture.

Chris Russo-Fraysier expressed some concern about placement of a portable toilet at the Cow Pasture.

Susan McDowell spoke and suggested a portable toilet at the Cow Pasture near the kiosk.

Tim Rapczynski spoke and said that a portable toilet could be installed near the Maplewood Avenue of the Cow Pasture.

The Manager said that the portable toilets would be temporary rentals.

Diana Gray spoke and said she walks the Cow Pasture every day and picks up a lot of trash. She said a portable toilet at the Cow Pasture would be a bad idea because of the odor. She suggested use of the elementary school and insurance implications. The Manager said that the school district would have to decide to use the school, and that the state would have to pay any insurance costs associated with use of the BOR as a congregate shelter.

The Manager had back-and-forth with Judy Perkins that was not captured on the microphone. The Manager said that there was broad consensus that there would be no camping for the Cow Pasture, and that there are likely better locations for portable toilets downtown than at the Cow Pasture.

Rosemary Averill spoke and commended Ericka Reil's work on homelessness issues. She said we should take care of the Barre City homeless and questioned why the City would open itself up to more.

With no more public comment, the Manager offered a summary of what was heard from the task force, committee and members of the public as follows:

- The City's current practice of no sanctioned camping, however the Police Department does not actively look for people camping and only responds when situations are brought to its attention.
- The dog park and BOR parking lot were suggested, but the Manager said that his impression is that the City can best respond by using the BOR as a congregate shelter instead of using the parking lot for tents.
- Providers will continue to guide people to places where they can safely camp.
- Loud consensus that there should be no camping or portable toilets at the Cow Pasture.

Ericka Reil and Chris Russo-Fraysier agreed with the Manager's summary.

The meeting was adjourned.