

Proposal to address homelessness in Seattle city charter met with intrigue, skepticism

April 13, 2021 at 6:00 am | Updated April 13, 2021 at 2:51 pm



Tents line the edges of Miller Park and Playfield just north of East Thomas Street. A group of business and nonprofit leaders is proposing an... (Greg Gilbert / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ▾

By [Daniel Beekman](#)  and [Scott Greenstone](#) 

As business leaders and lobbyists were writing Compassion Seattle, a voter initiative to address street homelessness through changes to the city’s charter, Gordon McHenry Jr. agreed to provide input, hoping to improve a document he thought could stoke political discord.

And when [the campaign](#) went public earlier this month, the United Way of King County executive director provided a statement for the launch, praising a clause in the proposed charter amendment that would require the city to quickly provide more shelter and housing, plus mental health and substance-abuse disorder services for those experiencing homelessness.

But McHenry isn’t ready to entirely add his stamp of approval on Compassion Seattle, which also would require the city to keep public spaces like parks and sidewalks clear of encampments. And he’s not the only homelessness advocate with complicated thoughts about the measure, underlining the touchy nature of the effort.

“Some people characterized us as boosters. We are not boosters,” McHenry said in an interview last week. “I think the concepts are worthy of support ... But we have not endorsed it and we don’t plan to until we have better clarity on funding the policy mandates and better clarity on the likelihood of successful implementation.”

It’s been more than five years since Seattle declared a homelessness emergency, and tents have grown even more numerous during the pandemic. So it’s no surprise that a campaign aimed at the issue is attracting major attention and donations.

“This is really about doing what we know works to get people inside,” said Downtown Seattle Association President Jon Scholes, who helped draw up the initiative, which news site PubliCola [reported on first](#).

Yet the Compassion Seattle campaign, which must submit more than 33,000 petition signatures to qualify for the November ballot, still has questions to answer, voters to persuade and tensions to manage. Politicians, activists and experts spent last week trying to digest the proposal’s implications, and the campaign absorbed some criticism.

While the charter amendment would require City Hall to provide additional emergency or permanent housing, the proposal includes no extra revenue to pay for that increase in 24/7 shelter beds, tiny houses, hotel rooms and apartments.

Meanwhile, the measure’s mandate that Seattle keep public spaces clear “as emergency and permanent housing are available” is somewhat vague, causing some advocates to worry it could compel encampment removals they regard as cruel and ineffective, even though boosters say they have the opposite aim.

Charter amendments are relatively rare, because the process is arduous and the stakes are high. Seattle’s bedrock document can only be altered at the ballot and most provisions deal with governance, not programs.

Execution would be another wild card. Mayor Jenny Durkan and the council have boosted spending on tiny houses and hotel rooms, but work to open the spaces has in some cases lagged. Voters will choose a new mayor this year

(Durkan isn't seeking reelection), and the city is supposed to cede its homelessness response soon to a regional authority.

The City Council could, in theory, propose an alternative charter amendment.

Like many in Seattle politics, Nicole Grant is intrigued by Compassion Seattle. "If there was a place for everybody in Seattle to live, nobody would sleep in a tent," said Grant, who heads MLK Labor, the region's largest union group. At the same time, Grant wants to know, "What this would mean in the real world, not on paper."

Campaign launch

Compassion Seattle's brain trust includes Scholes, plus former City Council member Tim Burgess and leaders from neighborhood business associations, who are the campaign's registered officers. They polled voters, quietly drafted language and then consulted with some nonprofits.

An April 1 news release included supportive statements from the Downtown Emergency Services Center, Evergreen Treatment Services, the Public Defender Association and the Chief Seattle Club.

Some stakeholders described the proposal as a bargain between business groups who previously have lobbied for encampment removals and nonprofit organizations that help homeless people. The parties say they now agree that noncongregate living spaces with services (rather than mats on the floor) are the ultimate answer.

"I am glad to have this vision clearly stated and endorsed by such a wide range of people," Daniel Malone, executive director at DESC, said in a statement.

The charter amendment would require 1,000 additional units of emergency or permanent housing within six months and another 1,000 within 12 months. It also would require the city to help King County fund rapid-response mental health and substance-abuse disorder services. "As emergency and permanent housing are available," the amendment says, the city would need to ensure that public spaces "remain open and clear of encampments."

Under the proposed amendment, Seattle would be required to allocate at least 12% of its general fund to human services, including homelessness, and would have to support the regional homelessness authority. Land-use regulations, taxes and fees would be waived for projects serving homeless people.

Using a charter amendment to set policy is "not typical," said University of Washington law professor Hugh Spitzer. More common are changes like a 2013 voter-approved amendment that converted seven citywide council positions to district seats.

"Usually constitutions and charters don't have this level of detail, but sometimes people want to entrench a concern to make darn sure it happens and make it difficult to dislodge," Spitzer said.

The charter could be "a clumsy vehicle to use" because the homelessness crisis is a moving target, former council member Nick Licata added.

Nearly 3,800 people were unsheltered in Seattle last January, according to an annual estimate. The city budgeted for more than 2,700 shelter spaces, tiny houses and hotel rooms this year, according to the council; a \$12 million boost [last month](#) could add many more.

Mixed reactions

More than 70% of likely voters polled in February supported the amendment's approach, according to Compassion Seattle, which didn't share the exact wording of the poll. Howard Behar, a retired Starbucks executive who lives downtown, already has donated to the campaign.

"I trust Tim Burgess. He's progressive but not in a permissive way," Behar said. "We've got to get people housed and treated. We can't go on like this. Who wants to come to a city with human feces on the streets and urine smell everywhere?"

A different type of support comes from Chief Seattle Club Executive Director Colleen Echohawk, whose organization works with people experiencing homelessness and who's running for mayor. In a statement last week, Echohawk said the proposal would treat the homelessness situation "like the emergency it is" and would prohibit removals "unless there is a place to go," according to her interpretation.

The amendment would bypass City Hall, which could appeal to voters impatient with the mayor and council. "I know they care, but they just don't seem to get the job done," Behar said.

But Compassion Seattle is a political beast nonetheless. Its architects include Scholes, Burgess, lobbyist Tim Ceis and Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce President [Rachel Smith](#). Donors include the real estate titans Vulcan Inc. and Clise Properties.

Not party to the effort was Harold Odom, who lives in a tiny house village in Georgetown and co-chairs the regional authority's implementation board. "I want people to be at the table," he said, concerned the initiative could complicate the authority's work.

To Tiffani McCoy, the measure just doesn't smell right. For years, business leaders have opposed progressive taxes that could pay for more housing, even as a tech boom has exacerbated Seattle's wealth gap. The charter amendment's imprecise language might be cited by Seattle's next mayor to justify encampment removals, which have slowed during the pandemic due to public health guidance, suggested McCoy, Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project's advocacy director.

Burgess laid out his vision in a January [op-ed](#). While calling for the city to increase access to treatment services, he also decried the council's "tolerance and accommodation" on encampments. (Burgess is a member of The Seattle Times' Project Homeless advisory board)

"It's a lot of bad faith and smoke and mirrors," McCoy said, predicting business lobbyists will use the initiative as a wedge in this year's elections. "They want to get rid of visible poverty. It's not about dealing with the root issue."

Durkan declined to comment on Compassion Seattle. But the proposal already is dividing her potential successors. Andrew Grant Houston, an architect and urban designer, described Compassion Seattle last week as a plan to ramp up encampment removals that don't help. Former state Rep. Jessyn Farrell said she supports the measure and doesn't think it would allow rampant removals. Former Councilmember Bruce Harrell praised the effort.

Funding is another source of tension, because the amendment includes no new revenue; the Chamber is suing over the "JumpStart tax" on large corporations that the council passed [last year](#).

Seattle budgeted \$175 million for human services this year, or about 11% of its general fund. That's only \$15 million less than the 12% the amendment would require. But 2,000 units of shelter and housing with services would likely cost more than that and up to \$100 million, Scholes said.

Low Income Housing Institute executive director Sharon Lee, whose nonprofit provides services at Seattle's existing tiny house villages, said she worries the charter amendment could pull resources from other needs.

City Council President M. Lorena González, also a mayoral candidate, is still learning about Compassion Seattle and has requested a staff analysis, she said. She wants to know how the mandate would mesh with existing plans. When council members passed their JumpStart tax, they earmarked more than \$100 million annually, starting in 2022, for low-income apartments. Those units will be needed as outlets from shelters, González said.

Councilmember Andrew Lewis isn't too anxious about revenue, he said, considering how much money Washington, D.C., is pumping into COVID-19 recovery, with an estimated \$240 million headed to Seattle. The city also could slice from elsewhere, such as the Police Department, he said. It alternatively could couple the initiative with higher business taxes.

Voters should know the council has in the past six months approved spending on hundreds more hotel rooms and tiny houses — in line with Compassion Seattle, Lewis said.

The campaign's view

The Compassion Seattle campaign insists the city has plenty of money, thanks to the JumpStart tax, COVID-19 relief dollars and the ability to reallocate resources.

"It's been the city's policy to spend the last dollar on this crisis, to wait around for the next tax," Scholes said. "We need to prioritize the first dollar."

Scholes rejected the idea that the charter amendment was crafted to promote encampment evictions, blaming critics who "want to keep the same old fights raging. This is about bringing people inside, not chasing people around," he said.

Already, federal court rulings have limited what cities can do to crack down on encampments without offering shelter to occupants.

Compassion Seattle is meant to build on that, requiring higher shelter standards, with services like those provided by JustCARE, Scholes said. Born during the pandemic, JustCARE connects people on the streets with hotel rooms and

intensive case management.

Someone could be evicted under the amendment's mandate, as is the case today, but they would be less likely to decline help with better options, Scholes said.

Fragile coalition

Burgess and DESC's Malone declined interview requests, as did the Public Defenders Association, Evergreen Treatment Services, the Seattle King County Coalition on Homelessness and the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington.

Trust issues make the politics around the initiative challenging, noted Tim Harris, a veteran of Seattle's homelessness battles who until recently ran Real Change.

Though business and nonprofit leaders have worked closely before, battles over taxes and council races tinged by a nasty narrative on homelessness recently seemed to "evaporate" any middle ground, Harris said.

"This looks like a return of the 'coalition of the reasonable,'" he said. "The situation with the encampments is untenable. There's a dramatic need for these 2,000 units."

Still, dealing with a debate over revenue and understandable concerns about encampment removals is "going to be tough," Harris said.

That's something the United Way's McHenry knows well. When he saw a draft of the charter amendment earlier this year, he said he was alarmed. It led with housing but also emphasized removals.

The current document is better, McHenry said. But much depends on how the next mayor would read Compassion Seattle's mandates and carry them out.

McHenry says he hopes the initiative would promote an approach that meets the needs of people living unsheltered. "We need to provide them a better reality," he said.

Daniel Beekman: 206-464-2164 or dbeekman@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@dbeekman](https://twitter.com/dbeekman). Seattle Times staff reporter Daniel Beekman covers Seattle city government and local politics.

Scott Greenstone: sgreenstone@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@evergreenstone](https://twitter.com/evergreenstone).

 [View 73 Comments](#)