



to clean up homeless campsCity Council approves funds

Gallup wants to clean up its transient camps, which will require the city to spend more than it usually would, given that contractors must wear personal protective equipment to shield themselves from coronavirus.

With that in mind, members of the city council unanimously approved \$75,000 on Jan. 12 for the planning and development department's clean and lien program to help it get through the next budget cycle, which ends mid-year.

"It's very costly, but it is necessary. It is a life, health and safety issue that we need to stay on top of as best we can," C.B. Strain, planning and development director for the City of Gallup, said. "If we don't, it will get a lot worse."

The new funding for the clean and lien program came just months after the council had approved the same amount back in August. Between then and now, the planning and development department spent \$48,000 just to clean up transient camps — 24 in all — and another \$13,000 to clean up other properties. Strain told council members that what was left was not even enough to clean one transient camp, so his department needed more money.

He told the *Sun* the new money could go to clean and lien and at least 24 more transient camps.

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“Because they’re not slowing down,” Strain said. “We kind of chase them around; we dismantle one and then they pop up in another spot. It’s kind of like a cat chasing a mouse. At the same time, we need to stay on top of it, because it will get a lot worse.”

He said the clean and lien program doesn’t always recoup the money it’s budgeted for.

“It’s a balancing act between public safety and health and the budget — public safety takes priority, of course,” Strain said.

He reminded the council at the Jan. 12 meeting that the department must still tend to typical properties, not just homeless camps.

“Council, I know you get complaints on these all the time, so we got to go in there and clean these up as well,” Strain said.

TRANSIENT CAMP PROBLEM

Strain explained the program’s purpose, saying it was developed to deal with residents’ problems with property upkeep — from weeds to dilapidation or inoperable vehicles. Code enforcement officers can visit the property to give owners notice of their violations up to three times. If nothing is resolved, the city comes to clean up and pays for it with a lien on the property.

“We’ll go and foreclose on the lien after a certain amount of time and then get our money back if they [the owners] don’t voluntarily pay,” Strain said. “Now, the majority of them are really good about getting on a payment plan. Some of them aren’t and we have to go to court.”

The clean and lien program has been “really good at cleaning up a lot of problem areas,” he

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said.

Within the last few years, the program has cracked down on transient camps — both on public and private properties, Strain said.

“These things aren’t slowing down; there’s a bunch of them in town and they just keep growing,” he told council members.

Strain said some of the transients are suspected of criminal behavior, so it’s not uncommon for law enforcement to join the code enforcers — who are not armed — when they visit a camp.

“A lot of them are aggressive, so we need back up by the police to help clear them out,” Strain explained. “And then the same process kicks in. We’ll get a contractor to go in there and give us an estimate. Then, they’ll clean it up and get rid of debris and everything else and it’s done.”

But just because one transient camp is dismantled doesn’t mean the city has heard the last of the people who lived there.

“They typically just go on their way and they generally just wind up setting up camp somewhere else,” Strain said. “If there are people with warrants, they will be arrested and dealt with on the [police department] end.”

CITY COUNCIL REACTION

Transient camps were front and center at the meeting when it came to discussing the clean and lien program.

Dist. 4 Councilor Fran Palochak, said she knows there has been an increase in such camps, in

part because of COVID-19.

“People are setting up camps and they are very unhealthy,” she said. “I have people that go on walks in the country and come upon these camps and people are using the bathroom without facilit[ies].”

In an interview with the *Gallup Sun*, Jan. 13, she mentioned two instances in which citizens in her district notified her of transient camps.

“As soon as I am notified of transient camps, I go check it out myself [to see] if it is a valid complaint,” Palochak wrote in an email.

In one instance, a camp consisted of “mattresses, blankets, trash, and the smell of feces and urine,” she wrote. The area was later fenced off. On the Northside of the city, camps and people living in vans were observed.

Palochak said during the meeting that the new spending for the clean and lien program was appropriate, especially given the personal protective equipment that is needed for contractors to clean the camps.

“We’re not just blowing money,” she said. “This is something that is absolutely critically needed.”

“I do approve the \$75,000 increase,” Dist. 1 Councilor Linda Garcia said. “We need to have more money put in.”

Garcia thanked Strain for keeping everyone up to date on the transient camp issue. She noted that she has heard of growth among the camps, as well as a change in their level of sophistication.

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Strain also commented on the changes he's seen at at least one of the transient camps. He said that one located by a concrete culvert had generators and had become "a pretty sophisticated little community."

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Sun Correspondent