



Louis Krauss | Grays Harbor News Group James Horack, 54, starts pulling a cart filled with blankets, furniture and other belongings before his shack gets leveled by Aberdeen city workers.

Last residents depart homeless camp, as city confirms plans to sell it

LOUIS KRAUSS ([HTTP://WWW.THEDAILYWORLD.COM/AUTHOR/LOUIS-KRAUSS/](http://www.thedailyworld.com/author/louis-krauss/)) • Mon Jul 29th, 2019

11:58am • [NEWS \(HTTP://WWW.THEDAILYWORLD.COM/NEWS/\)](http://www.thedailyworld.com/news/)

As excavators prepared to demolish the large lean-to tent he built with tarps and wooden beams, part of his riverside home at the longtime Aberdeen homeless encampment, a wistful Leonard Vervalen took a break from packing to hit some golf balls into the Chehalis River Wednesday afternoon.

A week had passed since the city began clearing people and structures from the longtime homeless encampment along the Chehalis River in Aberdeen, and Vervalen's campsite, one of the largest, with multiple vehicles and homemade structures, was the last remaining.

Vervalen, 53, said it's fitting he's the last one to leave the longtime homeless encampment since he's lived there eight or nine years with his wife and is one of the long-term residents. When asked where he'll go next, he wasn't sure, and said he might drive his motorhome north to Moclips or Humptulips and just live out of it,

hunting for food with a bow or crossbow. But he dismissed the idea of moving into the new tent shelter opened by the City of Aberdeen in the City Hall parking lot, and said he dislikes the restrictions, curfew and not being able to cook.

“It goes against everything we love and believe in,” said Vervalen. “Would you like living in a fish bowl? If I want to sit down and smoke a cigarette while looking at the river I’m going to do it.”

It wasn’t a smooth departure. After hours spent trying unsuccessfully to restart his motorhome, police and Public Works staff arranged for tow trucks to pull it just outside the gate to the city-owned property, where the city also dropped off some of his belongings.

Aside from Vervalen, Jamie Hall, 49, was another of the last to leave the riverfront. Police ordered a trespass warrant for Hall’s arrest Wednesday afternoon because he was unwilling to leave the property. But Hall has since left the property and the warrant is going to be quashed, Aberdeen Police Lt. C.J. Chastain said, meaning there were no arrests made as a result of the encampment clearing.

Like some other camps, Vervalen’s had a wide assortment of trashed and broken items — rusty bicycles, generators, tarps and metal parts scattered about.

Mayor Erik Larson reported there were an estimated 30 dump truck loads of garbage and items removed so far, weighing in total around 300 tons.

“I’ve seen many complaints of missing items from individuals, and I’d guess a lot of those items were down there, but in an unrecognizable condition,” said Larson, who added that because of the living conditions, he feels relieved that people are no longer living at the camp.

“It was a pretty abysmal life to be lived out there, and the fact is many of them weren’t necessarily doing it by choice,” said Larson.

But while Larson and some city officials felt relief after the site clearing, for Sarah Monroe, an advocate for the homeless who had sued unsuccessfully to try and stop the camp razing, the feeling was sadness.

“The rest of the world might not see these as homes, but a lot of people are watching homes they built themselves out of scraps torn down in front of them with few options ahead of them,” said Monroe.

With the encampment now cleared of all people, the city plans to finish leveling it before putting it up for sale. The city purchased the property nearly a year ago for \$295,000 from a longtime private owner. Larson has said the city was only purchasing it to address public health and safety concerns caused by the large homeless encampment, which at one point had more than 108 people living on it but has decreased in size since the city started managing it.

The site is a narrow property between the downtown train tracks and the Chehalis River, and covers eight acres, according to the Grays Harbor County Assessor’s website.

Larson said the city would also calculate how much it spent total on the property and what the value of the property is before selling it to someone who’s interested. He estimated Wednesday it would be somewhere around \$425,000 total, and he was confident the city would have no issues selling it. He also confirmed there’s a chance the city could make a profit by selling the property.

A couple days before the city began clearing the property, the City Council agreed to establish a temporary overnight tent shelter in the parking lot behind City Hall. It started with 38 tents registered and bought by the city, but it quickly hit full capacity, and the city expanded it to 43 tents supporting 55 individuals.

However, it’s still got a lengthy waiting list, with more than 20 people interested in getting in as of Tuesday morning.

The facility, now called the “Temporary Alternative Shelter Location” by the city, is meant to be a short-term location while Larson attempts to negotiate acquiring another property for a long-term site homeless people could live on. He said after the July 10 council meeting that there is a property in mind but he wouldn’t give details.

The council originally approved \$30,000 for the city to run the shelter for 30 days. But the end cost came higher than expected, with \$33,625 as the updated estimated total for 30 days in the report for this Wednesday’s council meeting. To ensure the shelter

can stay open the council unanimously approved a report Wednesday to allocate an additional \$10,000 for the shelter, bringing it to \$40,000 total.

The 24/7 security appears to be the biggest cost at \$18,000 for the 30 day period.

There was some concern from Council Member Dee Anne Shaw whether \$40,000 would keep the shelter open until the next council meeting Aug. 14, but Larson said he was confident it would, and Community Development Director Lisa Scott said the continued cost would be lower now that one-time costs to set up are completed.

It's unclear how long the city will run the shelter, but the council approved a report to extend the temporary use permit for the facility 90 days (until Oct. 15) if the city needed to keep it open that long, but it doesn't stop the city from closing it sooner. Larson said he doesn't anticipate the shelter being kept open for the full 90 days.

Five homeless people living at the City Hall shelter spoke at the public comment period Wednesday, and suggested improvements to the site such as cleaning the portable toilets more than twice a week, providing an area to prepare food, allowing people to enter after the 10 p.m. curfew if they have late-night jobs, and placing more than one picnic area for people to congregate.

"It was pretty hot today, and there's only one communal area, this one picnic bench area where people can sit and it's not stagnant air to breathe," said Patrick Carey, who lives at the site. "Otherwise, they just sit on the concrete, which was difficult because some people were hot and didn't have other options."

Several of the homeless people and Apryl Boling, an advocate for the homeless who's assisted people on the riverfront with leaving, praised the Aberdeen Police Department for how it handled the site's closure and for being patient and helpful to those moving off the property. Boling said in one case Deputy Chief Jay Staten provided a cot for a wheelchair-bound woman at the City Hall shelter so she didn't have to sleep on the ground.

The Rev. Bonnie Campbell, who's part of Chaplains on the Harbor and often provides meals to people near the riverfront camp entrance, specifically commended Aberdeen Police Chief Steve Shumate and Staten for how they handled the site clearing.

“It was wonderful seeing how compassionate they were, and I think the other advantage is creating relationships between the police and the people living down there,” said Campbell. “They haven’t always had those good relationships, and I think that’s good for the city.”



(Louis Krauss | Grays Harbor News Group) Kenny Miotke, left, 64, talks with Lisa Celeste, 59, at the tent shelter behind Aberdeen City Hall.