



Awaiting a sweep

North Clinton homeless encampment in limbo

Madison Scott Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

A little community of tents lines the perimeter of the grass lot on North Clinton Avenue. Every morning, these Rochesterians wake up in their encampment not knowing if they will have a home and their belongings to return to at night. ● Uncertainty follows the 15 or so people living outdoors here. There’s been word that it will be swept soon, but when? And where will they go next?

On a chilly morning in early September, the lot was dotted with bikes, clothes, personal items, tents and food. A framed photo of a couple hugging was placed on a tree stump next to one of the tents. An old Santa statue holding what looked like a stuffed bear was in the corner.

Evidence of life, of humanity. Of neighbors.

There were remnants of drug usage in the lot — a reason for the many complaints from nearby residents. It was getting close to 8 a.m. and other kids and adults, likely housed ones, began gathering at a bus stop not too far down the road.

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ABOVE: A homeless encampment is set up in an empty lot on North Clinton Avenue.

LEFT: Advocates for the homeless dropped off food and coffee last month.

PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Encampment

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Rochester, like many other cities in America, has seen its fair share of encampments and encampment sweeps. When one gets cleared, another one seemingly arrives.

In 2022, the city cleared the Loomis Street homeless encampment. Though the city said they were offering assistance to those displaced by the sweep, many advocates at the time, like Joel Yager, predicted that people would overdose without the support found in the encampment.

A year later in the spring of 2023, an encampment beside Interstate 490 was removed by the New York State Department of Transportation. Local legend suggests that "The Weeds," which was once considered a safe space for many, was around since the '70s before its removal.

In March 2024, James "Tex" Martin, who once lived at "The Weeds" and volunteered at the community garden across the street, died of an overdose alone in a friend's house, as reported by acquaintances. Many people close to Tex believe that the sweep took away his only sense of home, community and purpose.

It put him at risk, they said.

There have been sweeps around the country, too. The Supreme Court's recent decision in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* allows state and local governments to criminalize sleeping or camping on pub-



Outside one tent a photo of Marilyn Monroe is propped up next to a makeshift table with a picture frame of family members placed on it. The tent was one of several in a homeless encampment set up in an empty lot on North Clinton Avenue in Rochester on Sept. 6. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

lic property. California Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered the removal of all encampments on state lands following the ruling.

Moving forward: What's next for the North Clinton Encampment?

Toward the end of September, RGPR held a press conference around the previous site of the Loomis encampment to address the county and city about the potential local impact of the *Grants Pass v. Johnson* ruling. The group raised concerns about barriers to receiving shelter

and then provided a list of demands.

County Legislator Rachel Barnhart and City Councilmember Mary Lupien stood among the crowd of speakers and supporters. Barnhart said she received RGPR's list and has been working with her colleagues to develop solutions. She believes congregate shelters are only one tool and that the county needs to focus on other avenues, like permanent housing.

According to Barnhart, it would cost the county about \$20 million a year to put everyone seeking shelter into apartments. Conscious decisions are being

made to not invest in building more permanent housing, she said.

"And we also do things like sanction people. We kick them out of hotels when they don't find housing fast enough. That is cruel, and we don't even keep data on it," Barnhart said.

Whether or not there is work being done behind the scenes to address some of these issues, the clock is ticking for the people living at the North Clinton encampment. It's been a month since the group first got wind of a potential sweep.

DES stopped by the encampment Sept. 12 to clean up trash and debris, but left everyone's personal belongings alone, RAHA volunteer Matthew Gould said. The group at North Clinton hasn't received any official timeline for when a sweep will be conducted, he said. According to D'Amico, the police have made multiple visits to the encampment and have given dates for a planned sweep, but have repeatedly canceled or rescheduled them.

"They keep canceling it, changing the day, keeping it insecure for people staying and harassing people living there," she said.

Days are getting shorter and nights are getting colder. How much time do they have left at North Clinton?

And what will happen to them after they are forced to leave?

— *Madison Scott is a journalist with the Democrat and Chronicle who edited our Weld Street Project and also did reporting for it. She has an interest in how the system helps or doesn't help families with missing loved ones. She can be reached at MDSScott@gannett.com.*