

Tenters relocated; Protesters move to Centennial Building

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Abstract (summary)

Bonnie O'Dea and a group of supporters pitched their tent city in the corner of the popular downtown historic site and tourist park to draw attention to what she considers her unjust eviction from a subsidized housing unit. Woodside wanted the province to remove the tent city under a piece of legislation governing historic sites and attractions.

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Fredericton Mayor Brad Woodside volunteered the use of his van Tuesday to load up tents belonging to protesters, who have occupied Officers Square in the downtown for more than a week, and relocate them.

Bonnie O'Dea and a group of supporters pitched their tent city in the corner of the popular downtown historic site and tourist park to draw attention to what she considers her unjust eviction from a subsidized housing unit.

O'Dea blames Fredericton Non-Profit Housing Corp. for bouncing her, her 12-year-old daughter and two 18-year-old children from an affordable housing unit.

Woodside, who helped move the tents to the Centennial Building's front lawn, said he's not unsympathetic to O'Dea's complaints and he has pledged to speak out on the issue of homelessness and affordable housing.

The city mayor said he was just unhappy with the choice of location O'Dea had made for her public protest.

Officers Square is a prime location for visitors to the capital city in the summer. Woodside wanted the province to remove the tent city under a piece of legislation governing historic sites and attractions.

The province refused late last week, prompting Woodside to describe the government as "gutless" for refusing to enforce its own laws.

On the weekend, Woodside convinced O'Dea to move.

"I said, 'Let's talk. I'll listen to your problems. You listen to mine. The only problem I have is the appropriate use of this site. I'll help you move to another location. You help me by moving,'" Woodside said.

From a public perspective, Woodside said, it's hard to differentiate between levels of government and visitors to Fredericton simply see the tenters in the corner of Officers Square, but don't necessarily know that their beef isn't with the city.

Supply and Services Minister Dale Graham said the mayor didn't consult with government about moving the protesters to the Centennial Building, but if they want to camp there, they're welcome.

"He is the mayor of the City of Fredericton. If he feels he should be involved ... He'll have to decide what he wants to be involved with," Graham said.

If he felt he was doing the tenters a favour, more power to him, Graham said.

"I'm not aware of any legislation to bar them ... If individuals want to express their opinion, they're certainly able to do that," Graham said.

The Centennial Building is a security-monitored government office and the protest at the makeshift tent city will be monitored.

Family and Community Services Minister Tony Huntjens said the provincial government cares for 130,000 citizens every day.

"When someone needs a home, we make sure they have a home. We've advised the person here that there's a process to go through. She knows what the process is. If we follow the process, we'll take it one step at a time," he said.

Huntjens said as far as O'Dea housing her 12-year-old daughter in a tent, it's her responsibility as a mother to look after her child.

"If we thought the child was in danger, we'd step in," he said.

O'Dea said the Centennial Building is a better location for her demonstration to catch the ears of politicians.

"It is so easy to solve this problem. I'm not asking these guys for \$1 million or give me a brand-new mansion. All they have to do is give me back my

subsidy that was wrongfully taken away and I'm not going away until its done," O'Dea said.

"What he (Woodside) offered is, if we moved over to the government building, he would publicly support our cause. What that meant specifically is that he would move our tents and supplies in his van, which he did, and help us set up here and tell the news media that he was all in favour of what we were doing," said Vaughn Barnett, one of O'Dea's supporters.

Barnett said the focus will be on pressuring the provincial government to find a solution to O'Dea's housing problem.

"We're taking the 'lawn' into our own hands. We're getting in the face of the government," Barnett quipped.

Barnett, an Ontario law school graduate, works as an advocate for people who cannot afford a lawyer. Barnett said he has chosen not to write the New Brunswick bar exam, but to advocate on behalf of those who cannot afford a lawyer. The Law Society of New Brunswick has slapped him with an injunction to prevent him from providing lawyer's services to members of the public, even though Barnett says he functions as an advocate, not a lawyer.

Papers drawn up for O'Dea, seeking judicial review of her eviction, were thrown out of court based on the law society's intervention before the judge hearing her June 29 application.

O'Dea is unhappy with the provincial Rentalsman's office, the judge, the government and the law society.

O'Dea's group is one of two currently trying to catch the government's attention with their issues.

A group of Miramichi young people are still tenting on the front lawn of the legislature to protest the lack of funding for a youth house.

(With files from Shannon Hagerman.)

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