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City, protesters nudge closer to deal

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Abstract (summary)

The mayor earlier this week handed the group a letter asking it to leave the square in order to facilitate the installation of a Christmas tree for the city's Dec. 2 tree-lighting ceremony.

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Fredericton Mayor Brad Woodside and the Occupy Fredericton movement, which has set up camp in Phoenix Square in front of city hall, have brokered a compromise, although not the permanent removal of the camp.

After a morning meeting at city hall Thursday, the Occupy Fredericton movement has agreed to scale back the size of its tarped encampment and tidy up the site.

It's not a permanent solution, Woodside said.

"I've asked them to move. They're not ready to move just yet, which has created a bit of an impasse," said Woodside.

"However, they are undertaking to downsize and scale back and clean up the property a bit in terms of how it looks esthetically. That will be taking place between now and the weekend and then I'm going to reassess and have a look and see what they've been able to accomplish."

The mayor said he's disappointed the group won't relinquish the public square, but he's not ready to physically remove the group.

"This Occupy movement here and all across North America has caught a lot of people off-guard. What I mean by that is the ability to go in and physically remove people.

"We don't have, at present, the legislation because we've never dealt with anything like this before. We have got to have the legal legs beneath us."

The mayor said he's meeting with legal and senior staff to put together legislation that will address Occupy movements or any other public protests where people encamp in public spaces.

"I support one's right to protest. I think it's a very important right, but I do not condone, nor can I support occupation of property that involves sleeping on location and so forth. I don't support that," Woodside said.

There are members of the public who are telling him to move them out.

The mayor would like to see a peaceful resolution to the Occupy movement in Fredericton.

"For some people it seems like it's very easy to deal with, but I can assure you it's not."

The mayor earlier this week handed the group a letter asking it to leave the square in order to facilitate the installation of a Christmas tree for the city's Dec. 2 tree-lighting ceremony.

"This isn't by any stretch of the imagination an open-ended thing."

Woodside said with snow in Fredericton and temperatures getting colder, public health and safety factors are also coming into play.

Arthur Taylor of the Occupy Fredericton camp said three representatives met with the mayor.

"His position is that he would prefer we move our camp to another location," Taylor said.

"Our position is one of the reasons we want to stay here is that people know we're here and we're visible and that's an important element in what we're trying to do, to raise awareness and engage the public about issues that are of concern to a lot of people," Taylor said.

"We agreed to downsize our camp for the putting up of the (Christmas) tree and the ceremony and we haven't really decided what we're going to do after that.

"We're going to maintain our presence here, but as well as keeping our presence here, move into a secondary phase of outreach and networking with local unions and branch out into the business community and do some charity outreach."

The group has had nightly educational sessions and it will move those meetings to other locations as part of the outreach efforts, Taylor said.

Possible locations could be at coffee shops, art galleries or at the University of New Brunswick.

"We're also setting up field trips over at Conserver House. Every Friday night, they screen a documentary on a different subject," he said.

"The downsizing aspect is really the least of what's happening here. We're actually expanding more than anything else."

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