“Where Will They Go?”

Whenever we consider the exclusion of encampments from the La Crosse River wetlands and floodway, we are almost inevitably asked to respond to the question, “Where Will They Go?”

I believe this question doesn’t belong to our local government to answer. There is an incorrect premise in the question and an improper frame. The question itself implies that our local government has a responsibility to provide some (or in fact any) people with a dwelling place.

The City of La Crosse doesn’t make that promise to anyone. It is an impossible expectation to believe that a local municipality has an obligation to provide a dwelling space for any and all people who show up to live within its limits. This expectation is wrong and as long as we continue to hold it as a premise for deliberation, we will be unable to create good policy for all dwellers within our locality.

It is illogical and therefore unreasonable and therefore immoral to place culpability for an action when the agent is incapable of performing the action. Similarly, it is immoral to expect the actions of local government to achieve what it is incapable of achieving.

We need to develop policies that protect safe and sanitary dwelling places. We should (and already do) attempt to reduce barriers for people to find more access to suitable dwelling spaces within La Crosse. We should (and already do) produce policies to promote the creation of more affordable housing within our town. Even with all of these met responsibilities and expectations that we hold for ourselves, we do not and cannot place the expectation that we will guarantee a healthful dwelling for any and all who arrive within our city limits.

The responsibility for finding one’s place to live is upon the shoulders of the individual. The question that asks where will THEY go is disrespectful to the individual by othering THEM into a category that presumes to ignore the multitude of lived reality for the individual person. Mature and capable adults need to exercise their freedom to be the masters of solving their own problems.

As a local government we are attempting to move in the direction of respecting the freedom of individual persons with housing challenges within our city and county through the named list approach of the Pathways Home Project. Every person has their own story, their own hopes and dreams, their own way of seeking solutions to their own challenges and problems. We cannot presume through our governmental policy decisions to know how to solve other people's problems for them, to find there place where to go.

It is wrong for our Common Council to presume as background to our deliberations that we have to answer the question, “Where will they go?”