

Victoria News

## Judge mulls 'tent city' arguments

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The B.C. court of appeal heard closing arguments last week in a case to decide whether Victoria's homeless have a right to sleep and camp in city parks.

In October 2008, the B.C. Supreme Court struck down Victoria's bylaw banning people from erecting tents or tarps. Given the lack of shelter spaces, Victoria's homeless have the right to security, ruled the judge.

Several homeless advocates celebrated the decision by setting up tents in Beacon Hill Park.

The City responded by implementing a policy limiting camping to night time only, as well as to certain areas of the park. It also decided to appeal the court's decision.

The courts cannot dictate how the city allocates its resources, argued acting Mayor Dean Fortin at the time.

Beacon Hill's "tent city" has since dispersed but between 40-50 people continue to sleep in the parks each night, said Katie Josephson, spokesperson for the city. As the weather warms, the numbers are rising, though most choose to isolate themselves in the brush, she added.

Every morning, four city parks and bylaw staff are tasked with making sure campers pack up at 7 a.m., according to Victoria's new bylaw.

The vast majority comply but debris is an ongoing issue, Josephson said. Recently, city staff removed three truck loads of garbage from Topaz Park, including sleeping bags, tarps, drug paraphernalia and liquor bottles.

The appeal to reverse the October decision wrapped up last Thursday. The judge's decision could come at any time, but may take several months.

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