

Is the School Street bridge Brockton's 'Mass and Cass'?

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BROCKTON — For 14 years, Brockton City Councilor-at-large David Teixeira has owned a mattress store — Mattress Makers of New England — downtown on the corner of School and Montello streets, adjacent to the School Street MBTA Commuter Rail bridge.

Teixeira said on one morning he found 15 needles dropped behind his store. He said he built a fence surrounding the property and two weeks later a portion was “desecrated.”

He said business was down by about 43% this year.

“It’s not easy being a business owner in this area, especially downtown,” said the councilor at-large at an Oct. 16 Brockton Finance Committee meeting.

“This past year, I’m really thinking hard to move out of that location,” he said.

'Influx' of people experiencing homelessness in Brockton

Downtown Brockton has seen an influx of people experiencing homelessness, many of whom come from nearby towns to utilize the shelter system and other social services Brockton offers, according to Jazmine Bradsher, Brockton’s director of social services.

Meanwhile, open drug use and violence under and around the School Street bridge has become increasingly more common, according to officials, including Ward 5 City Councilor Jeffrey Thompson and Father Bill's & Main Spring President and CEO John Yazwinski.

“The number one issue right now impacting us is the influx of people coming here — newer people coming here — living under the bridges, living in the core of the city,” said Brockton Mayor Robert Sullivan at a Nov. 8 meeting on the state of downtown.

“Businesses [are] saying the heck with Brockton and we're moving out of here. We can't afford that,” Sullivan said.

Homelessness, drugs in downtown Brockton

Across Montello Street from Teixeira's mattress business lies a small park called Salisbury Brook Park. On a chilly evening last week, roughly 20 people congregated around a couple of picnic tables.

Perkins Park on Main Street has a reputation for being Brockton’s hotbed for drug use and violence, but a lot of that activity has recently moved to Salisbury Brook Park and underneath

the surrounding railroad bridges, said Risa Mendes, who was previously homeless and recently moved into a basement apartment on the south side of the city not far from the park.

Mendes said she sees violence and drugs around the park every day. Many people sleep under the train bridges.

“It’s the life we’re living. We can’t complain,” Mendes said. “This is my second family.”

The city works to connect with people living on the street to help them find public resources they need, like rehab or employment programs, Mendes said. The city will come by and pass out food.

Meanwhile, drugs like heroine, fentanyl and xylazine — a horse tranquilizer — are common, and at times are used quietly but publicly.

“I see it. They see it. I know they see it [on the] outside,” Mendes said.

“The problem that we are having right now that I haven’t heard spoken about is xylazine,” Jill Simshauser, a peer-specialist recovery coach who lives on White Avenue, at the State of Downtown Brockton event in November. “It’s a horse tranquilizer.”

Business owners downtown like Teixeira are beginning to consider leaving the neighborhood, according to Sullivan.

“I’m just tired. Not against homeless, but I’m tired,” Teixeira said.

Who owns the School Street bridge?

The train bridges and the land underneath them are owned by the MBTA and are technically public land.

City officials have considered building large 3D art installations in the alcoves underneath the four bridges downtown, which would displace any people who sleep under them. Officials have not confirmed if they plan to move forward with the project.

“We are working with the MBTA which owns the property on a plan to beautify these areas of our city. We are always looking for innovative ways to improve downtown and public art is a priority,” said Sullivan in an email statement to The Enterprise.

The MBTA did not respond to requests by The Enterprise for comment.

Since the area is public land, the city isn't permitted to remove people unless there's a bed in a homeless shelter they can move into, according to state law, city officials said. But Father Bill's MainSpring emergency homeless shelter is pushing its capacity to the brink, and some guests sleep on mats on the floor, Yazwinski said.

Can the problem be fixed?

Father Bill's plans to open a new, state-of-the-art homeless shelter in 2024 that stays open during the day unlike the current MainSpring shelter. The facility includes 32 apartment units of permanent subsidized housing.

"We have a broken mental health and substance use system in the Commonwealth," Yazwinski said. "The homelessness issue is the final result of not dealing with the mental health issue and substance use issues and the housing issues that need to be dealt with."

Bradsher said her team is conducting an ongoing census of the people who live on the street, to better understand the problems this population is facing.

"The more I listen to people who have experience in this area, the more hopeful I am for the future," said Thompson, the city councilor who represents the Ward the downtown neighborhood is located in.