

# Salem is Losing It

Last year at this time I posted an essay lamenting what we as Salem citizens have lost. You can read a shortened version below followed by an update, because over the past year we have seen our city lose even more. I think we can all agree that Salem's unhoused population needs help, and we are all willing to do our part. However, when unhoused people—many with severe *untreated* mental-health and substance-abuse problems—keep arriving, everyone loses.

--Joanne Mattera, September 2025

Written late summer 2024

## What We Have Lost

"There's nowhere to sit around here!"

I was walking on Washington Street a few days ago and overheard two witch-hatted tourists near Lappin Park lamenting the lack of this very basic offering to visitors and citizens. I think we know why. The benches had been removed to keep homeless folks from sleeping in a park visited and photographed by tourists. (Can't have Trip Advisor warning people away.) The city knows the presence of unhoused people congregating literally in the shadow of City Hall is an embarrassment, and I'm sure the decision to remove the benches came from there—as if the daytime gathering at Riley Plaza, with people sleeping, and occasionally having sex under the shrubbery, is not equally disconcerting.

A marked increase in the number of unhoused people making their way to Salem, the inability of Lifebridge to effectively minister to them, and the way the city has tried to address the problem with a no-rules ad hoc shelter on Canal Street makes clear what we, citizens and tourists alike, have lost. Sirens punctuate downtown numerous times a day, stopping at Riley Plaza or Lifebridge, whether to tend to an overdose or break up a fight. Trash is everywhere, specifically used needles, empty nip bottles, discarded food containers, and I'm sorry to say, human excrement. Panhandling is excessive and often aggressive. And with an attack on a senior citizen on Endicott Street and a stabbing in the Broad Street Cemetery, Salem residents are feeling on edge.

**What we have lost: clean streets, quiet, and a sense of safety**

Now there are fires burning. You don't want to blame any one group, but you do wonder if the surreptitious encampments in the woods had something to do with those fires. One of my neighbors reports this conversation: "I saw a fire department employee in the Dunkins lot today. Asked him how it was going with the firefighting in the woods. He said they were containing it, but that it was challenging. I asked if the homeless were responsible. Making sure no one was listening, he said, 'Yes, campfires are to blame.'"

It's not likely that someone deliberately ignited a multi-day, multi-alarm conflagration, but setting campfires in the woods during a protracted dry spell, intentionally or not, is reckless and irresponsible. Smoke blanketed the city for several days, and city officials warned us to stay inside. No outdoor exercise. No gardening at the time of year when it should be done, although there was no such option for the small businesses that do yard work. No walking your dog. And if you have respiratory issues, you're out of luck. Could it happen again? Yes.

**What we lost: wooded acreage and fresh air**

Sirens punctuate downtown numerous times a day, stopping at Riley Plaza or Lifebridge to tend to an overdose or break up a fight. Trash is everywhere, specifically used needles, empty nip bottles, discarded food containers, and even human excrement. Panhandling is excessive and aggressive.

With a proposed larger Lifebridge shelter and the inevitable influx of even more homeless people to Salem, we must consider how to balance the needs of those who are less fortunate with those of us who are trying to make a life in Salem. We pay taxes, sweep our sidewalks, recycle, and try to keep our kids safe. We are painfully aware, as our quarterly property taxes rise, that we are footing the bill for overtime pay for police and firefighters and receiving ever less in return.

My neighborhood, which borders the current shelter, is more sensitive to the cause-and-effect of the homeless influx, but the entire city is affected. I'm not blaming every unhoused

person who has arrived in Salem, but let's balance help for them with the needs of a historic city, the majority of whose citizens are of modest means. Yes, upgrade the current shelter, but do it within existing zoning rules. Opening the neighborhood—and the city—to the deregulation of the proposed 40R overlay will give developers free reign to build, build, build. Who profits? The developer. Certainly not us as we navigate around used needles, people sleeping under shrubs, and hesitate, in a walkable downtown, to venture out after dark.

### **What we are losing: A historic neighborhood in a historic city**

<https://streetsofsalem.com/2023/05/30/a-neighborhood-besieged/>

**Update: Summer 2025**

## **Salem Continues to Lose**

We know there are people who need a place to stay while they seek work and affordable housing. However, unstable and untreated homeless folks, whether they live at Lifebridge or on the street, put an entire city at risk—the homeless community, the larger Salem community, our police and firefighters, and eventually the tourists, whose online negative comments will stain Salem's reputation as a historic and welcoming city.

### **We are losing businesses**

If you happened to be walking on Essex Street mall on August 25, you would have seen two 16-foot moving vans in front of Cabot Wealth Management. Workers were loading up office equipment. The company has relocated to Beverly. Why? Here's Rob Lutts, an owner of that business, in his letter to the Editor in *The Salem News*, July 30:

*"We are all sympathetic towards the homeless population and acknowledge they need help. However, since the city has lacked the will to assist in keeping a clean and healthy downtown, this is clearly driving professional businesses out of downtown Salem. In fact, my company has made the decision to move out of Salem."*

The Reddit posters went into overdrive with their version of "good riddance," apparently unaware that a business like Lutts's helps people like themselves plan financially for an old age in which *they* do not end up without a roof over their heads.

The departure of Cabot Wealth Management is not a harbinger of things to come. It is part of an exodus already in progress.

The man who owns a business I frequent says he plans to sell his building and, like Lutts, move elsewhere. "I see homeless men relieving themselves against the side wall of my shop. They are also discarding used needles on my property," he says. He told me that recently a fully naked man walked right by his shop and then lay down on the sidewalk in front of it. "I've started to lock the door now," he adds. Of course he called the police, whose response was one of dozens that week—and every week—to our city's problem. Worth noting: This man's building houses additional businesses that serve the community. They will be gone, too.

Ongoing business also have their problems. A Steve's Market shopper tells me that workers keep a supply of kitty litter on hand to absorb vomit left outside the store.

### **We are losing long-time residents**

Older people as well as families with young children are making plans to sell their homes downtown. Some have already gone. Who's going to tell prospective buyers that the nicely maintained two-family home they're thinking of buying comes with people having sex under the porch and leaving fecal deposits in the back yard? Moreover, the new buyers will be paying a hefty mortgage, so the second-floor or attic apartment that has provided an affordable rental will no longer be affordable.

### **We are losing ground literally**

Have you been to Charlotte Forten Park recently? The lovely little pocket park on Derby Street, which cost us something like \$1 million, is filled with unhoused people using the space for storage, living, or bodily functions.

While public toilets are not much of an issue for housed Salem residents, visitors will find few clean places to go. An artist who works at Artists' Row reports that the restrooms there were shut down earlier this year after someone OD'd inside the facility. That person was saved by a quick-thinking waiter from the Lobster Shanty who administered Narcan, according to the artist, who adds, "You now need a key to use the bathroom, and the city has to assign someone to monitor it." And have you seen the restrooms at Witch City Mall?

At the Broad Street Cemetery (site of a stabbing last summer), homeless residents sleep, have sex, shoot up, and congregate. A woman who lives in a condo overlooking the cemetery says that she is on high alert just going from the door of her building to her car in the building's parking lot. "We found a gun in the bushes."

### **We are losing ground ideologically**

On a spectrum that runs between caring for the city as a whole and caring only for the homeless, several city councilors are clearly at the latter extreme. Where are the city's lawmakers at the

other end of the spectrum—or even in the middle—who are thinking about the people and businesses that allow Salem to grow and thrive? Please speak up!

Since I have been writing about the unfettered growth of homelessness in Salem, city workers from various departments—even state officials—have been quietly sharing their concerns. Their comments are shocking. They have told me about homeless folks shooting up outside City Hall during the day, near where the mayor parks his car. They have voiced their concern about the still-lax camping ordinance that allows homeless people to take up residence in the woods. They have changed their exercise routes to avoid aggressive folks camped out along walking and bike paths.

Some city officials are deeply, but quietly, concerned that the rights of homeless folks with no real ties to Salem have been prioritized over those of us who live, work, and pay rent or taxes here.

### **Build it and they will keep coming**

Suppose Lifebridge gets the City Council go-ahead to double or triple in size. Suppose there's a bed for every single person who currently needs one. Do you think this will end homelessness in Salem? Think again. You can expect an endless stream of unhoused people arriving under the delusion that the city is paved with shelter beds.

Is it going to take the rape or murder of a Salem citizen before the City Council wakes up? You tell me. In April this year, an out-of-town homeless man murdered two out-of-town homeless men in the woods behind Walmart, yet plans continue apace to let Lifebridge expand, which would attract ever more homeless people to the city, whether or not they opt for or are allowed into the shelter.

How many more businesses will we lose, how many more tax-paying residents will we lose, how many more lives will be lost before you restrict the growth of an ineffective shelter facility and impose some restrictions on the influx of unhoused people to our city? We will never be able to help them all. And we, as a city, will continue to lose. Mayor Pangallo and members of the City Council: This is on you.