

## **A Glance at Camp Pekiwewin 2020**

By Faisal Ally

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Photos by F. Ally

Driving down 109 Street heading north, passing the University of Alberta and the High Level bridge, to the right a steep hill takes you down to the one-way bridge called the Walterdale Bridge with three lanes and arches reaching up to 184 feet. Witnessing the white colored arches and the striking modern day design evokes memories on the many bridges, which I have driven across in New York City. The modern design of the bridge and a city with one of the biggest malls in the world, boasts the growth, development and riches over the past five decades. This bridge takes you across the North Saskatchewan River towards the heart of the city. The bridge was opened in September 29, 2017 replacing the old Walterdale Bridge which was built in 1913, where construction of the bridge had begun in early 2013 with millions of dollars, labor and years poured into this latest development in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada making the city more attractive where visitors from all across the world destines to spend days and weeks at West Edmonton Mall. As I drove across the bridge to the right is the Re/Max Field in the Rossdale area where baseball games are played. This year, the scenery has changed.



In the year 2020 life was turned upside down for many across the world as the covid-19 pandemic came to life, destroying many lives. But for some in Edmonton, life has been in shackles, from birth or for years, or even for generations. Nestled between the lively

Walterdale Bridge and the RE/Max baseball field in the open landscape in the Rosedale area is a camp with over 170 tents with a big sign at the front that says THIS IS NATIVE LAND. This camp is called 'Pekiwewin Camp, a solidarity and resource camp against police violence (1).' Inside the camp is a teepee for prayers. Driving by, from the outside, you can see people going about their business.



Camp Pekiwewin was set up before sunrise on July 24, 2020 for the homeless and by the end of the day a dozen tents were set up. Days to follow, the camp grew with more tents and more people passing through. The site of the camp reveals a protest to end homelessness and 'calling on the City of Edmonton to permanently convert the space into a ceremonial and gathering place for Indigenous communities (3).' At the camp, there were volunteers and groups such as Black Lives Matter assisting helping out and giving a voice to the homeless, which the government and society has neglected.

As I drove pass the tents a number of times and looking in from the outside, I have only seen indigenous people. There are run down tents, shopping carts, a man down on his luck sitting on the sidewalk with his bicycle lying on the pavement. Who would have ever expected to see such conditions Alberta, Canada which is one of the richest provinces in Canada. It's obviously more important to pour money and labor into the construction of a dazzling new bridge, view and redesign the city, but it's evidently not important to pour enough money into programs and housing for the homeless and to end poverty in one of the richest place in the world. The sight paints a picture of how the government has failed to take care of some of its people; not only the government but also the rich people living in this city. The indigenous people are hoping to regain this area as for generations in our past history, this area was 'a traditional gathering place, trading, burial and ceremonial grounds amongst many Indigenous families for generations.' (1)

This area is only used for extra parking during the baseball games at Re/Max Field across the road from Pekiwewin. Perhaps Pekiwewin will one day be the new name for this spot bringing more development to the city, but this time for the original people of this land. About five minutes driving north and up the hill you will drive into the heart of the city, the downtown area of Edmonton which have grown over the past few decades with many office towers, construction and new developments. The downtown library was recently opened having undergone a complete redesign. It's conceivable that one day that scenic area in Rossdale will be developed as being requested by the Indigenous people. We need change and we need change now! Everyone's life must matter. And homelessness should not be allowed for any one. All lives matters! And we want to see progress!

### **Some of the conditions and demands for the homeless**

There are a large number of Indigenous people who are homeless in Edmonton and are often discriminated against. According to the Shima Robinson who is a contact at the camp, the updated demands are, 'free transit, the establishment of an accessible emergency response fund for frontline workers, more transitional support services, a review of bylaws that target people in poverty and an end to tent slashing and property destruction.' Defunding the Edmonton Police Service budget by \$39 million was removed from the demands. Robinson reminds us that there's an 'urgent need to address the lack of housing in the city (Ref 3). There are also complaints about police violence on the homeless communities such as the alleged slashed tents and pepper sprayed used.



### **Homelessness and life at the camp**

People at the camp and the ones passing through seeking shelter, meals and support have grown to about 400 a day. At night the tents provides a place for people to sleep. In the morning, coffee with snacks and in the afternoon a meal is provided. There are many volunteers and health care workers providing services at the camp.

There are daily problems at the camp and according to Kaela Siewert who is a former EMT says there are about five overdoses a week and 'all successfully reversed.' Other problems are faced such as a life-threatening injuries during an assault of a camp member. (4)

The Mayor of Edmonton, Don Iveson, had stressed how urgent it is in resolving homeless in Edmonton and have given a '10-week deadline for finding a solution before the

weather turns cold (3)' During the pandemic the government had announced 48 Million to assist the homeless. Iveson, emphasized the importance of having enough housing for the homeless before it gets cold.

The last time I passed by Camp Pekiwewin was November 12, 2020 and the tents were still up. Edmonton has already had overnight temperature to around -18 Celsius before November 12. On that day as I drove by, there was a police vehicle blocking the inside street. It looked like some people with their belongings were being taken to shelters for the homeless. I have heard of one building on the Southside being used for the homeless. Homelessness must end and all lives should matter and be treated with respect.

### **References:**

(1) Local group occupying green space in Edmonton river valley

CTV News Edmonton Staff

Contact. Published Friday, July 24, 2020 10:19PM MDT Last Updated Saturday, July 25, 2020 5:19PM MDT

(2) Local group occupying green space in Edmonton river valley; |CTV News 2020-09-17; <https://edmonton.ctvnews.ca/local-group-occupying-green-space-in-edmonton-river-valley-1.5038780> Page 3 of 7

(3) Camp Pekiwewin issues updated list of six demands to the City of Edmonton to address poverty and homelessness; by Dustin Cook; Aug 30, 2020

<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/camp-pekiwewin-in-rossdale-provides-updated-list-of-six-demands-for-the-city-of-edmonton>

(4) 'This is about prayer': Inside Edmonton's Camp Pekiwewin

River valley encampment has 170 tents helped by army of volunteers; Jordan Omstead; CBC News; Aug 12, 2020 6:00 AM MT | Last Updated: August 12

(5) 'This is about prayer': Inside Edmonton's Camp Pekiwewin

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/this-is-about-prayer-inside-edmonton-s-camp-pekiwewin-1.5682391>; | CBC News 2020-09-17, 12:44 AM

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