I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Sammamish City Council for their foresight in directing City of Sammamish staff to research and develop regulations for permitting temporary homeless encampments in the future. While I believe the issues of mental health, access to quality health care, drug addiction, chronic unemployment and homelessness are issues that affect all of us and require a response from a variety of sources (not just government or churches) I do not believe it is in the best interest for homeless people to reside in temporary tent encampments (TTE) nor do I see it as a solution, particularly when beds are available in heated, indoor facilities specifically for shelter and food for the homeless. I have concerns for the safety and health of the residents of the TTE’s, public safety, property values and the reputation/desirability to attract homebuyers and businesses to our community. However, I understand the parameters we are forced to live with when state and federal law allow homeless encampments as part of a religious mission.

I do not have any experience in creating laws and regulations so I will just list my thoughts and concerns and hope that your staff will consider them in the creation of permitting processes.

Is there a legal way to limit hosting temporary tent encampments (TTE) to religious missions located on property zoned Commercial Business only? It seems like a fairly densely populated residential neighborhood zoned R-6 incurs a heavy toll on property desirability/valuation when the living space of several homes face into and abut a church with only five acres of land and the church is zoned for residential use R-4 (in the case of Faith United Methodist Church, 16 homes surrounded by hundreds of single family dwellings nearby). Worse yet, what if a homeowner in a residential zoned community decided to host a TTE under the guise of a “religious mission”?

In the event a property owner on a residential zoned parcel cannot be legally prevented from hosting a TTE for religious missions, can the number of residents in the TTE be capped at a smaller number based on the size of the hosting parcel of land? In other words, the smaller the parcel of land, the smaller the cap on residents living in the TTE.

I have heard that the City of Seattle has some of the best regulations regarding TTE’s in the area. I don’t know if this is true, but would urge the City of Sammamish to include Seattle’s permitting regulations as a part of this ongoing process.
As part of the permitting process it seems religious organizations should be required to work with the surrounding neighbors to develop some mutually agreeable terms before they enter into a contract with a TTE. King County required a Neighborhood Meeting as part of the permitting process. The way Faith United Methodist Church handled the meeting was a total failure and contentious at best. It was treated as a way to disseminate the required legal information the County required, but the questions and concerns of the immediate neighbors and the surrounding community were blatantly disregarded. FUMC did finally agree to take questions in writing and then put them on the church website, however the church maintained control and only chose selective questions. Many really good questions were blatantly ignored and others were dismissed as “you just don’t understand the issues of homelessness”.

There should be a minimum amount of time from the intake of the application request and when it is granted. Granting a religious organization a permit to host a TTE in 3-4 weeks is much too quick for consideration of all issues which must be considered, particularly when it is the religious organization’s first application. Hosting a TTE puts a burden on public safety (fire and police), the City of Sammamish permitting staff, the immediate homeowners abutting the religious organization, the nearby neighborhood(s), the neighboring businesses, and the hosting religious organization.

Site safety and the safety of residents in the TTE should also be considered. For example, if the hosting religious organization has trees in obvious need of sailing/maintenance the residents should not be allowed to set up their encampment under the offending trees. Further, if the church property has not been maintained and has lots of brush, stickers, brambles it is a fire hazard. Consideration of factors such as these should be part of the permitting process.

TTE’s should be located within a minimum number of feet from neighboring property lines, not allowed to be at the fence line of bordering property. Further, placement of honeybuckets, food service, etc should not be allowed placement near property lines. If a religious organization wants to host a TTE, let them carry the burden of the view, noise, and aromas that are part and parcel of hosting a TTE. Don’t let them force it on the neighbors and the community.

If TTE’s are to be allowed on residential rated parcels of land neither cigarette or marijuana smoke should be allowed on the site. While they may be legal they are still drugs, just like alcohol and illicit drugs. Neighbors should not have to be subjected to the aroma and subsequent health risks of inhalation of these odors 24/7. These encampments should be walled and made to be as visually unobtrusive as possible. Extra noise from traffic should be
regulated as lots of traffic comes at time of providing meals, service truck noise increases in frequency and these should be limited to normal business hours for a residential community.

As a part of allowing a permit, the effect of overflow parking should be considered. If a religious organization is using parking lot space for housing the TTE, where will cars park when they bring meals or attend services or events on the property? The surrounding neighbors should not have to be further burdened and unable to have parking for their own guests. Also, does the City of Sammamish provide proper safety signage to address where overflow parking can and cannot occur? It is impossible for a driver to have safe viewing when making a 90 degree turn if vehicles are parked right up to the edge of the intersection.

No TTE should be permitted unless background checks are required at the start of each new encampment in Sammamish. TC 4 only requires a background check when the resident first enters their community. However, a person may remain in that community for three or more encampments and not have any further background checks. In other words, they could go a year or longer without a background check.

To prevent the City of Sammamish or a specific religious organization from being “the place of choice” (to fairly share the burden) permits should only be granted over a certain period of time. (i.e. Only one religious organization in the City of Sammamish allowed in a given year AND no single religious organization may host two years in a row).

Permitting during summer months should be limited to religious organizations located on Commercial Business rated property. The state of Washington typically experiences only about three months of warm weather. During that time most homeowners want to have their windows open for house-cooling purposes, entertain in their backyards, sell their homes, work on their homes and yards to maintain their property values and the like. There is more noise in residential neighborhoods in the summer (lawnmowers, leaf blowers, roof repairs, weed whackers, etc.) By contrast, most religious organizations prefer to host TTE’s in the summer months because it interferes the least with the missions of their church and church attendance is lower during summer months. If religious organizations located on residential rated properties are legally allowed to host TTE’s during the summer months, this puts an unfair burden on the neighboring homeowners, particularly those abutting the property. It makes it especially difficult to sell a home during the summer months when it can be made to look most desirable.
The City of Sammamish should require payment of fees from the hosting religious organization to cover the extra costs associated with hosting a TTE, to cover the expenses for extra services provided by the City – permitting staff, site review, extra public safety, insurance, etc.