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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 13, 2015

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Councilor Benton Issues Statement on Homeless Camp

In a statement to the Albuquerque Journal, Javier Benavidez of the Barelas Community Coalition (BCC) and Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) stated, "The neighborhood is a compassionate neighborhood and wants to do something about ending homelessness and the City hasn't shown the leadership to do that."

I strongly object to the second part of this statement. It degrades years of City Council effort on workforce housing, and recent exhaustive efforts by the Council and the Bernalillo County Commission to provide supportive housing combined with behavioral health and social service case management.

Homelessness is a problem nationally due to the continuing enrichment of a small population at the direct expense of the many. Despite implications to the contrary, I know of no single municipality that has yet come up with a simple plan to "altogether end homelessness."

When I visited the new camp site on Thursday afternoon, it was clear that several people were behaviorally unstable. Unless they just recently showed up, they have been offered behavioral health support and short-term housing at the previous site. Some people at the previous site refused that help and others accepted a motel voucher, but are probably not being tracked or followed with assistance during their one-week voucher duration.

In Albuquerque, State and County as well as the City are working together for long-term solutions. In accordance with overwhelming support in the last election, under the proposed 1/8 cent County tax, city residents will be taxed, and we should have a strong say in how the tax is used.

A structure has been recommended by the Behavioral Health Task Force, which I sponsored, but requires state as well as city and county funding. I am working through the Council budget process for capital and operating budget funding. Besides the identification and renovation/construction of a central crisis center and short-term housing, another immediate challenge is the recruitment and training of a larger corps of behavioral health and social service case managers.

I did not support the Administration's issuance of eviction notices at the original site; neither do I support the actions of activists who invited the takeover a site within a single-family neighborhood. At the Las Cruces Hope Village, a non-profit organization oversees structured self-governing transitional camp on city property with adjoining social services, and not within a single-family residential neighborhood. Under a defined program, I could support such a temporary facility, but in my opinion, the City cannot and should not operate or govern it. Will the BCC and SWOP step up take that on?

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