Arlington asks MassDOT to remove spikes keeping homeless from sleeping under Route 2 bridge

State transportation officials installed the spikes underneath the bridge to keep homeless people from sleeping under the structure.

By John Hilliard and Aimee Ortiz

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ARLINGTON — Town officials were unhappy to discover that the state transportation department had installed two rows of metal spikes underneath a Route 2 bridge to keep homeless people from sleeping under the structure and have asked they be removed, said a top official Sunday.

The bridge crosses the Minuteman Commuter Bikeway near the Alewife MBTA station. The spikes, which were placed in a narrow space just below the road deck where people have slept, were installed in December.

“We have already asked MassDOT to take the spikes out, and we're still working with them to try and get that done,” said Town Manager Adam Chadelaine. “I'm certainly not happy with the placement of spikes as a solution, and I don't think anyone working in Arlington town government is.”

The spot, near woods and waterways, is a popular thoroughfare for commuters who use the MBTA station, bicyclists, and dog walkers, and over the years has attracted homeless people who sleep under the bridge or camp out in tents nearby.
A man walked his dog under the bridge on Sunday.

Chapdelaine said the spikes appeared after discussions with state officials about ways to discourage homeless people from sleeping under the bridge, but the town never sought to install spikes there.

MassDOT spokesman Patrick Marvin said that the spikes were not installed to discriminate against any one group but rather to keep out “trespassers.”

In a separate statement, he said: “As a result of feedback from municipal stakeholders and in order to ensure safety, measures were installed at this location to discourage trespassing.”

Two people bicycled underneath the bridge.
In a phone interview Sunday afternoon, Marvin did not address Chapdelaine's statement that the town had requested MassDOT to remove the spikes.

Marvin said the department “will be looking into this topic.”

Arlington’s challenges with addressing the problem of homelessness come as Massachusetts faces growing numbers of residents without homes, according to a US Department of Housing and Urban Development report released last month.

From 2007 to 2018, the homeless population grew by nearly 33 percent in Massachusetts, second only to New York, which had an increase of almost 47 percent during that time, the report said.

In a single night in January 2018, there were about 20,000 homeless people in Massachusetts, the HUD report said.

A tent could be seen not far from the walkway and underpass.

And those figures may be conservative, said Kelly Turley, the associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless. She estimates the true number could be double that.

The state’s soaring housing costs are driving homelessness, and officials should focus on programs to keep people in their homes and help build more affordable housing, she said.

Existing shelter space has not kept up with demand, and homeless residents shouldn’t be kept from using structures like bridges as temporary places to stay, she said.

“When you don’t have a roof over your head, where are you supposed to go?” Turley said. “We’re making the infrastructure and architecture so unwelcoming and harmful to people.”
A homeless man’s belongings could be seen underneath the bridge.

In Arlington, the town’s police and human services departments try to help homeless people living near the bridge, Chapdelaine said.

Arlington also cooperates with Somerville and Cambridge on efforts to connect the homeless with services and help them find housing, he said.

As people have slept under the bridge or camped out in the area, health and safety issues have emerged. In 2015, a double shooting near Thorndike Field led to the arrest of two homeless men, police said.

The shooting left two other men — a 17-year-old from Somerville and a 21-year-old from Waltham — with serious but not life-threatening injuries, police said. At the time, investigators said the shooting was not random.

Town officials later considered a bylaw that critics said would have outlawed homelessness in Arlington by requiring a permit to camp on public land, but later abandoned the proposal.

Resident Stephen Revilak, who was among those who opposed the bylaw, said the spikes under the bridge send a message to homeless residents: “Get out.”

“These are people living on the margins. To me, it’s the wrong message, because you are not giving any of these folks a chance to get back on their feet,” Revilak said in a phone interview.
A 51-year-old man who asked to be identified as Steve S. said he has been homeless for about four years and has stayed under the Route 2 bridge.

Marina Erulkar, an Arlington resident who was out for a walk along the bikeway Sunday afternoon, criticized the use of spikes to try to keep homeless residents away. She said more needs to be done to find permanent housing for people.

A short distance away, the blue tarp of a tent was visible in the wooded area near the Route 2 overpass.

“There has to be an alternative to people living outside,” Erulkar said.

Cambridge resident Susan Bernstein said the spikes were a punitive measure against homeless people.

“It’s disturbing to think that spikes are put in. [It’s] not a solution to the bigger issue,” Bernstein said.

A 51-year-old man who asked to be identified as Steve S. said he has been homeless for about four years and has stayed under the Route 2 bridge.

Standing under the bridge Sunday afternoon, he said the spikes may have been a “back door” way of asking homeless people to leave the area.

The spot under the overpass was a good place for homeless people to stay, he said.

“Everybody had their own little space,” Steve said.
Steve, 51, said the spot was a good place for homeless people to stay before the spikes were installed.

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