

Fall Bump Testimony

To: Portland City Council

From: Richard Perkins

Re: Fall Bump Testimony (Written Testimony)

Date: November 16, 2021

I applaud the proposals to add back PPB sworn officers and PS3 personnel to leverage their effectiveness. I am also pleased about the expansion of the Portland Street Response city-wide and the County's commitment to expansion of shelter beds. I also endorse the new BHECN Downtown, with the facilities and services proposed by Mayor Wheeler, Commissioner Ryan and County Commissioner Meieran, although I am anxious to know what steps the City will take to prevent the open-air drug dealing and some of the other Public Safety issues formerly associated with Bud Clark Commons. As a 32-year resident of Portland, the last 16 years Downtown, I have seen a lot of change in Portland, but the deterioration of Public Safety in the last two years is unprecedented and deeply disturbing. The moves you are considering takes us a step back from the brink. However, much work still needs to be done.

Interrelated with Public Safety is the issue of the unsheltered population in Portland. While the Fall Bump proposals will eventually have a positive effect on the gun violence we have been experiencing, and represent a beginning in addressing the mental health crisis that seems to have exploded, they are far from sufficient to address the scope and complexity of the problems of drug addiction, mental health, related property crimes, unsanitary conditions, trash and intimidation that has unfortunately accompanied the increase in the unsheltered population in many sectors of our City, but especially Downtown writ large. Downtown is especially hard hit due to the confluence of transportation routes and the presence of essential services and institutions here. We have just taken a step with BHECN to add a new service to the mix.

We are a progressive, compassionate city. A plethora of non-profits have been set up to address homeless issues. Our legacy churches Downtown have programs to feed the unsheltered. We have volunteer groups to pick up trash and provide assistance to the unsheltered. We have decriminalized drug use and possession and tapped Pot revenues to fund addiction treatment. We have allocated funds to create safe rest villages and new shelter beds. But the number of unsheltered has continued to grow, along with the negative effects on surrounding businesses, residents and workers. Downtown is a hollow shell of its former self.

The City Council has responded with a variety of initiatives to respond to a barrage of criticism from the press, homeless advocate groups, the business community and neighborhood associations. The initiatives in the Fall Bump are a component of this. That's good. But what is missing is a goal focused, well-conceived, evidence-driven Plan that addresses the full

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complexity of why we have unsheltered people in Portland. If we as a family or a group were developing a plan it would have these components:

- A clearly stated and measurable agreed upon goal
- An understanding of the obstacles preventing us from achieving the goal
- A set of strategies to overcome those obstacles
- A Plan to coordinate these strategies to achieve the goal and realistic expectations for achievement so we can build momentum
- A way to measure progress toward the goal and get feedback and make adjustments as evidence dictates.

Based upon this, Portland does not appear to have a Plan to address the collective pain around homelessness that is being felt by all Portland residents, housed and unhoused alike. It has been over two years since the last point in time tent count. We have virtually no information about the people in the tents or on the street, the unique situations that got and keep them there and where they came from. There is no common goal agreed to by the City Council, and hence, no shared evidenced-based solutions. What we have are cobbled together initiatives with fragile majorities supporting them, hampered by a form of government where dissenting Bureau leaders can defuse the initiative by withholding needed resources. What we get are insufficient results delivered long after the expectations that were set, all resulting in a declining confidence in City Government's ability to deliver solutions.

We badly need a City Government, working with the County and State, to solve the complex issues around the unsheltered. We need Portland's government to succeed. It all begins with an evidence-based, politically viable Plan by the City Council to end homelessness in Portland. The availability of affordable housing is certainly necessary, but it is hardly sufficient to solve the problems that have people living on the street and it is the costliest and most politically fraught ingredient and the one that takes the greatest amount of time and government resources to deliver. In the meantime, we have new people becoming addicted to meth and heroin daily. We have health problems and psychosis going untreated, assaults, fires and robberies occurring and businesses suffering. Perhaps, most frightening, we are busy creating America's Dalits, a new underclass. We need to find a way to start integrating the unsheltered into the larger society. That takes more than housing.

I agree that housing should be a basic right, but this is a political lift that is not possible to fully deliver in today's charged environment. We should continue to express this political point of view, but insisting on Housing First will unnecessarily expose the unsheltered to additional harm, making them pay for our ideological bias. Once we understand who is in the tents, the City can pull together around a common vision of a house for all but with some interim goals that move us in that direction, we can start some meaningful harm reduction for the unsheltered. We can treat psychosis. We can treat addiction. We can give people a clean and safe place to detox. We can provide, shelters, short term housing, safe rest villages and wrap-

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around services. We can end ad hoc camping. We can use neighborhood associations and other volunteers to better integrate the unsheltered into communities as we expand affordable housing. But we have to stop assuming each unsheltered person is only a victim. For those of you who believe that people addicted to drugs will eventually seek voluntary treatment, my own experience with addiction tells me that is inaccurate. Some tough love will be part of the equation, but with the goal of not saddling a drug addict with a criminal record.

For those of you who know me, you know I have plenty of ideas and energy to help. I think there are lots of people in this City who are like me. What we need is for you to stop the infighting and pull together around a shared common goal and a Plan to get there and a commitment to measurement and transparency. Once you do that, you will get plenty of support.

A good start would be to read the just released book San Fransicko by Michael Shellenberger (bad title but a good survey of evidence-based analysis of strategies employed to deal with homelessness, mental illness and addiction).

Let's show that the City can make meaningful progress in solving this issue. Thanks for listening.