

Michele Park

#267564 | March 15, 2021

Testimony to **Portland City Council** on the **Shelter to Housing Continuum Project, Recommended Draft**

Dear Mayor Wheeler and members of the Portland City Council, I am writing to strongly advocate for an important change in the language of Shelter to Housing Continuum recommendations from the Planning and Sustainability Commission. I am requesting the removal of Open Space Zones from consideration for either temporary or permanent houseless shelters EXCEPT for a declaration of emergency by the City Council due to a catastrophic natural disaster. I appreciate the consideration, research, and thought that staff and commission members put into the S2HC report and its associated recommendations. The problem of houselessness in our community (and across our country) is a complicated problem (both systemic and individual) and a result of exponential, uncontrolled increases in the housing market, decades of inequality, a widening disparity between the rich and poor, and ill-considered policy and economic failures. Houselessness is not new to Portland but has grown rapidly in recent years and seems likely to continue to increase as we deal with the long shadow of this pandemic. I believe the majority of the recommendations will do much to help Portland address our houseless crisis. My concern is focused on the recommendation that allows temporary shelters in public Open Space. I advocate that that Open Space, including developed parks, natural areas, and trails, be removed from consideration for siting of either permanent or temporary shelters for the following reasons: 1. Availability of Vacant & Underutilized Land - Because adequate alternatives exist, there is no need to site temporary or permanent shelters in the Open Space Zone. A BPS staff report to the PSC makes this abundantly clear: “The Buildable Lands Inventory showed us that we have plenty of land to meet the City's housing needs, for everybody. The constraint on affordability and shelter facilities is the cost of land and the cost of construction and operations, not the amount of available vacant and underutilized land. If we have enough land to house everybody, it is logical to assume we can fund space for the facilities used to shelter people currently not housed. So no, we do not need . . . Open Space to meet that need.” 2. Equity and Access - Allowing shelters in public open space removes that space from use for intended park purposes by everyone else. Increasingly, Portland residents live in spaces with no yard or outdoor area whatsoever. As our population increases and densifies, the role of parks, natural areas and trails becomes more and more essential. Looking ahead, the need for even more parks and open space will be critical to maintain our region’s livability for all. Changing the allowed uses for properties in the Open Space Zone makes it unavailable for its intended use. 3. Physical & Mental Health - Nature is not just a nice thing to have – it is fundamentally important for our health, wellbeing, and happiness. Study after study has confirmed that regular contact with nature is

required for mental health and well-being. When people visit parks and green spaces, they benefit from a reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress. Ensuring that these places are always there for everyone is critical for the health of our entire community. The pandemic has highlighted the immensely important role that parks and natural areas play in a densely populated urban environment. On July 31, 2020, a Washington Post article entitled “Pandemic underscores how public parks shape public health” reported that “Traffic to local parks is up dramatically [in the pandemic] as people seek safe outdoor places for recreation. Online searches for terms like “trails near me” . . . have spiked to unprecedented levels in recent months.” 4. Negative Impacts on the Resource - The environmental impacts of outdoor shelter are real and are difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate. Chapter 33.296 of the Portland City Code “allows short-term and minor deviations from the requirements of the zoning code for uses that are truly temporary in nature, will not adversely impact the surrounding area and land uses, and which can be terminated and removed immediately.” Siting permanent or temporary shelters in the Open Space Zone would be in direct conflict with the intent of this chapter. When protected and well managed, urban wildlife habitat makes important and measurable contributions not only to urban wildlife, but also to clean air and clean water. Our Parks and open spaces are already under stress. We see around us the negative environmental impacts resulting from unsanctioned camping in open space. It does not take long for the things we value most in our parks, natural areas and trails to be destroyed by overuse or inappropriate use. Siting larger, sanctioned camps or shelters in parks or natural areas, even on a “temporary” basis, is a policy decision that would do irreparable harm. 5. Long Term Character of this Emergency – Unfortunately houselessness is not a temporary problem. In the event of an emergency caused by a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, there is no question that public open space must be made available for temporary shelters. The humanitarian crisis related to our houseless community certainly qualifies as an emergency, but it is an emergency that is ongoing and manmade. It must fall into a separate category. The S2HC report acknowledges this fact in the 15.04 commentary: “Portland’s housing emergency was first declared in 2015 and has been extended several times. These extensions have highlighted that the need for shelter is not an episodic emergency, with a discrete beginning and end, but is a continuing crisis.” It is understood that the need to provide shelter options for our houseless population will be required long into the foreseeable future. The fact is temporary shelters placed in the Open Space Zone would most likely not be temporary at all. For the reasons outlined above, I believe it is critical to exclude the inclusion of Open Space for siting temporary or permanent shelters. The long-term impacts would be severe and the resources and time required for environmental and economic restoration would be extraordinary. Portland can and must do better than surrendering its parks, natural areas, and trails to any use, temporary or permanent, that jeopardizes their primary purpose - now and into the future.

Testimony is presented without formatting.