

Kayleen Kusterer

#267690 | March 15, 2021

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

March 14, 2021 Dear Mayor Ted Wheeler and members of the Portland City Council, Portlander's Love and Support Our Parks, Open Spaces & Natural Areas • In November 2020, Measure 26-213, to fund recreation programs and park services was overwhelmingly approved by the citizens of Portland. Yes Votes: 63.9% No Votes: 36.06% • The People of Portland voted YES to a tax at the rate of \$80 per \$100,000 of assessed property value for five years beginning in 2021 to fund recreational programs and park services. The people of Portland are willing to pay increased property taxes to support and fund parks. We voted YES during a Pandemic. City Officials who supported Measure 26-213: Mayor Ted Wheeler and City Commissioners Chloe Eudaly, Amanda Fritz and Dan Ryan. City Officials who opposed Measure 26-213: Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty • In November 2019, the citizens of metro passed Metro Measure 26-203, a \$475 million general obligation bond to continue regional programs that protect clean water, natural areas, access to parks and nature in Portland metro area. Yes Votes: 67% No Votes: 33% It is the job of every person in city and county government to be good stewards of the money the people have overwhelmingly approved to support our parks, recreation programs, nature, open spaces, and clean water. The changes to city code proposed by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, Shelter to Housing Continuum, which would allow homeless shelters in parks and open spaces, is in direct opposition to the will of the people as evidenced by the passing of Measures 26-213 and 26-203. The trust and confidence the people of Portland have placed in city and county government to support and protect our parks and open spaces should not be betrayed, for in the future it will not be granted. - Open space zones often include environmental resources that should not be disturbed. - Parks and open space have often been purchased with bond money limited to specific purposes or were given to the City with deed restrictions, often stipulating they must be used for parks, recreation, or open space purpose, which doesn't include housing, shelters, or other types of development. A letter from Parks Advocates: We recommend 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. We appreciate the consideration, research and thought that staff and commission member members put into the S2HC report and its associated recommendations. The misery and distress that houseless people suffer in our community is a heart-rending consequence of decades of inequality, 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. We believe the majority of

the recommendations will do much to help Portland address our houseless crisis. Our concern is focused on the recommendation that allows temporary shelters in public Open Space. We recommend that Open Space, including developed parks, natural areas, and trails, be removed from consideration for siting of either permanent or temporary shelters. Our rationale is outlined below.

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. Over the past twenty years, Portland voters have consistently approved tax measures to address inequities in access to parks, natural areas, and trails, most recently approving a new Parks levy in November 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. Obviously, access to these special places is important to our citizens. We cannot betray that trust.
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. Sadly, these areas 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, we believe there is no compelling rationale to support inclusion of Open Space for siting temporary or permanent shelters. The long-term impacts would be severe and the resources and time required for 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. For the reasons outlined above, we believe there is no compelling rationale to support inclusion of Open Space for siting temporary or permanent shelters. The long-term impacts would be severe and the resources and time required for 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. Thank You for your thoughtful consideration to this issue. Regards, Kayleen Kusterer 30-year Portland Resident

Testimony is presented without formatting.