

March 14, 2021

To: Portland City Council

From: Mary Beth Kurilo, Longtime Portland Resident

Re: Shelter to Housing Continuum Project, DRAFT Volume 3, February 2021 (draft reviewed found at: <https://efiles.portlandoregon.gov/Record/14373935/File/Document>)

To the Portland City Council:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Portland's developing plan within the Shelter to Housing Continuum (S2HC) document. As a longtime Portland resident and social work/public health practitioner, this issue is especially close to my heart. For several years, my family and I have brought dinner once a month to Transition Projects, and we check in with men in residence at the shelter, as they work their way back to stable and permanent housing. We talk with the staff, and hear about their heroic efforts to keep people safe and healthy, even amidst the COVID pandemic. We have watched in alarm as the Portland housing crisis has grown, becoming especially acute over the last year as the economy has dipped and services have closed or functioned at limited capacity.

From our vantage point, we've been disappointed the City of Portland and the County Commissioners in Multnomah County have not done more to address the crisis. We understand that the government is trying to balance loud and vocal competing constituencies, some who argue for a hard-line, no-tolerance approach to camping and homelessness in their neighborhoods, and others who argue for a non-interventionist approach, portrayed as the more humanitarian option.

In my view, the Shelter to Housing Continuum (S2HC) document proposes this latter approach. It suggests policies that, on the surface, sound humanitarian; allowing the development of shelters in a broader set of legally zoned areas. However, from my read of the document and the associated FAQ, it also appears to allow for temporary siting of shelters in parks and open space for long periods of time (typically, for up to 180 days). Our parks are not equipped to manage sheltering individuals; they don't have the cooking facilities, the hygiene facilities, or the space to support ongoing shelter. It is not humanitarian to allow for camping broadly, to support people fending for themselves in disposing of cooking waste, in determining how to manage human waste and garbage within a camp without services. Far from being humanitarian, this is an abdication of our responsibilities, and a step that further dehumanizes those individuals experiencing homelessness, while further polarizing a city trying to navigate this difficult time.

Portland's parks are resources for all of Portland, and allowing shelters in these locations strikes me as being directly at odds with maintaining Portland as a livable, neighborhood-oriented city, safe for individuals, families with small children, the elderly, all of us who have limited options and opportunities for recreation in the midst of the pandemic.

That being said, let me be clear that I support an increasing percentage of our tax resources being spent to develop and support appropriate increased shelter and housing resources. I also support tax increases to care for our most vulnerable. The true humanitarian approach, far from simply allowing campers to set up makeshift camps throughout the city and parks system, involves providing services, including hygiene options, medical care, substance abuse treatment, mental health resources, work

training programs, subsidized housing, an entire continuum of resources to address both immediate needs and long-term supports to help individuals maintain dignity and health in an untenable economic climate.

It goes without saying that the true root cause of the homeless crisis is bigger than Portland, and Oregon, and the Northwest. This crisis has its roots in a shameful growing income/wealth disparity, an absence of equitable health care and education resources, and a woeful lack of an adequate safety net of social supports. I don't have illusions that the City of Portland or the Multnomah County Commission will solve these problems. However, I do believe in Portland, in our creativity, in our ability to care for each other. I believe we can find our way collectively through this crisis, but it requires caring for our most vulnerable, without sacrificing the parks and public spaces that make Portland special for individuals, families, tourists and others.

Thank you for thinking of all Portlanders as you craft this plan.

Sincerely,

Mary Beth Kurilo, MPH, MSW
Mt. Tabor Neighborhood
mbkurilo@comcast.net
503-407-6205