

# Christine Swett

**#278036 | March 16, 2021**

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

TO: Portland City Council FR: Christine Swett RE: Shelter to Housing Continuum Project We oppose any amendment of Portland City Codes that would permit the use of Open Space Zones such as City Parks for temporary or permanent habitation (other than on an extremely limited and temporary basis in the case of natural disasters such as earthquakes). The elements in the S2HC plan that would effectively deprive Portland residents of their access to their open spaces, including City Parks, should be rejected by the City Council. We returned to Portland last year after living in other states and abroad for many years. We came back to Portland because we value the diversity, energy, open-mindedness and creativity of the population, and the good quality of life that is possible in the urban core of the city. Residents of this city value the quality-of-life Portland has traditionally offered. Our open spaces, including our parks, are an important part of the quality-of-life Portland offers. However, this quality of life for all Portland citizens, including our unhoused neighbors, is currently under siege. It is impossible to walk around in the Pearl, the North Park Blocks, Waterfront Park and elsewhere in downtown Portland without encountering mounds of trash, human waste, used hypodermic needles, people suffering from drug or mental health crises, petty and not-so-petty crime, and, in short, general and unremitting squalor. These problems affect everyone, including those trying to live decently without a solid roof over their heads. The homelessness crisis in Portland is a serious long-term set of problems that requires thoughtful, compassionate, and effective political and policy responses. Policy initiatives to date have been palliative, not curative, and have resulted in a deepening crisis, more desperate people, greater need, increased incivility, and a grinding erosion of the quality of life in this City for all its residents. The crisis affects all aspects of life in Portland and surrounding communities, and threatens to derail Portland's reputation as a desirable, progressive, forward-looking city. Many of the proposals put forward by S2HC seek to address the big picture emergency. However, allowing people to camp in more places does absolutely nothing to address the homelessness crisis. The proposed zoning changes would merely spread out the negative social impacts and pathologies associated with tent encampments. Changing the zoning rules to permit camping in parks (even if by some unlikely miracle such camping was well regulated and organized) would have a negative effect on all of Portland's citizens, without improving the lives of the homeless population or addressing the root causes of the crisis. Our parks and open spaces are used every day by Portland citizens, housed and unhoused, and are a necessary, even essential, component of the urban fabric. The parks should remain open to everyone; allowing tent or trailer encampments in our parks would essentially deprive everyone else of access to these

special places. This would be an inequitable and short-sighted policy for Portland to adopt, and there is no proposal to mitigate the negative environmental and social impacts such a change in public policy would entail. The suggestion that the use of Open Space Zones for non-permanent housing would only be used for 180 days is not credible; once sanctioned homeless camps are established in any City Park they will effectively be permanent. No one can credibly claim they have a plan to reduce the number of homeless people needing assistance; the proposal to set up more encampments in City Parks is simply another warehousing proposal that does not address the social, substance, mental health, and other drivers of the homeless epidemic. Lastly, the City Council should keep in mind the long term economic and social health of the city. If assaults on the quality of life in Portland continue, people won't want to work in the urban core, businesses will relocate elsewhere, residents who can afford to do so will move away, and the tax base will evaporate. Nobody wins in that scenario. The consequences of poor political leadership are real. Allowing our public open spaces to become encampments would reflect bad political leadership. Sincerely, Christine Swett

Testimony is presented without formatting.