

Patrick Cunningham

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

To begin, I'd like to say that I'm deeply sympathetic to the city's homeless population. I think the persistence of this crisis shames the city and people of Portland, and I'm invested in the process of finding solutions that benefit the city and its people (which very much includes people without homes). To that end, the majority of the Shelter to Housing Continuum plan strikes me as ambitious and overdue. I applaud many of the details. Like many Portlanders, however, I am alarmed by the apparent provision for allowing homeless encampments in city parks. To begin, I'm shocked by the lack of transparency on this issue. No mention of this appears in the PDF of the March 17th presentation, nor is it mentioned in Recommended Draft Volume 3 of the proposal. In fact, the only mention I can find is in your FAQ, which starts by implying shelters won't be allowed in parks "permanently" (implying the answer to the question is "no") before shortly thereafter acknowledging that shelters will, in fact, be allowed for 180 days at a time. (So not "permanently" ... just for 6 months at a time.) No details are provided as to what follows a given 180-day period. Is the occupation renewed for another 180 days? Is it acceptable to break down a given installation of shelters and rebuild them 24-hours later, starting another 180-day period? I don't know. I can't find answers to these questions. So I will start by saying this: if the city is planning to house people in city parks, it is not telling the people of Portland that. I have to assume this is deliberate, because the city is well aware of the response the proposal would illicit. Needless to say, if the city is deliberately obfuscating its plan, that is morally, democratically, and (I would hope) legally corrupt. If the city has no plans to house people in city parks, please ignore the following. Since I can't find an answer to my questions above, I'm responding to the possibility that use of city parks is part of the project. First, I'd like to acknowledge the (I would hope, obvious) value of Portland's parks. They are, of course, vital to the physical and mental health of Portlanders, particularly during the pandemic. They are also an essential part of Portland's character, beauty, reputation, and quality of life. When people have, historically, opined on how brilliant Portland's urban planning is, and how like European cities we are, they are talking about things like our incredible density of parks and green spaces within the city. And Portlanders are very much aware of this, which is why we constantly vote (as we did in the last election) to expand funding for Portland's parks. Converting these spaces to homeless camps would—regardless of what the city might like to believe—effectively take them away from most Portlanders. Yes, some people will be comfortable continuing to use the parks, but the majority will not. Additionally, the standard, unpredictable risks will apply: areas could see increases to crime, vandalism, drug use, litter, harassment, human waste,

etc. The planners may protest these possibilities, but they have no credibility to do so. If the city had the capacity to manage homelessness cleanly and safely, it would have done so years ago. You cannot turn city parks into homeless camps and claim (with any credibility) that the parks themselves and surrounding areas will not be negatively impacted. In short, this proposal takes one of the city's greatest quality-of-life features away from Portlanders, as a kind of "payment" to mitigate the homelessness crisis. My question is, why? Why is that necessary? Why can we not help people in the same way while preserving the park system? There are so many spaces in the city that are not being used (and are not city parks). Why not take these spaces and give them inspiring purpose? Isn't that better, smarter, more humane, and much more "Portland" than taking something so vital and so intrinsic to the heart of the city away from Portlanders? Why can't we help people find housing and also maintain one of the best city park systems in the country? Thank you, Patrick

Testimony is presented without formatting.