

March 30, 2021

Dear Mayor Wheeler and Portland City Commissioners:

SUBJECT: Testimony opposing the proposal to allow temporary managed shelters and camps in parking areas serving parks and natural areas, or within city-managed community centers.

On March 17, I submitted comments supporting much of the Shelter to Housing Continuum project proposal. However, I opposed locating temporary shelters and camps in city-owned open spaces including parks and open spaces. I understand that the proposal has been amended to prohibit shelters and camps within parks, natural areas, or environmental overlay zones. However, non-emergency shelters would still be allowed in the paved parking areas serving city parks and natural areas, or in city-managed community centers, for up to 180 days per year, or for the full duration of a city-declared emergency.

I oppose these remaining proposed allowances for the following reasons:

- Portland's parks and natural areas, and our community centers, belong to everyone, and the City has invested tremendous resources establish, maintain, and restore these treasured public assets.
- Allowing shelters and camps in the parking areas that serve parks and natural areas will reduce public access to parks and natural areas, and the benefits they provide to health and well-being, essentially trading one equity disparity for another.
- Shelters in the parking areas will change the character of our parks and natural areas from public open space to residential, thereby changing the quality of the experience. The parks and natural areas will feel less open and natural and perhaps more like people's backyard. Having people living in these parking areas will also feel intimidating to many park users and deter them from using the park.
- There will inevitably be spillover impacts on these lands, waters, and wildlife. The increasing demand for use of Portland's parks and natural areas has already created management challenges. Allowing shelters in parking areas will exacerbate these impacts. It will be difficult if not impossible to enforce parks rules including hours of operation, dogs leash requirements, managing human and pet waste, staying out of rivers and streams, etc. The ensuing damage will be long-lasting, and restoration will be very costly and difficult to achieve.
- Once situated, shelter residents will become used to being there and it will be challenging and painful to terminate the facility.

I also oppose the proposed allowances for temporary shelters in city community centers. Community Centers are also critical city facilities that should remain available to serve all Portlanders. My own community center, the Mt Scott Community Center, was converted to a shelter for people experiencing houselessness last October. I supported this decision given that the center had already been closed due to the Covid pandemic. However, the closure has been a real loss to the community. Mt Scott Community Center serves a diverse community of SE Portland residents.

Every effort should be made to address Portland's housing crisis, again without trading one type of equity disparity (access to affordable housing) for another (access to parks and natural areas). Rather than reducing access to parks, natural areas, and community centers, I urge the city to create a housing strategy that includes investing in more parks and community centers to address existing disparities and increase access to these important assets.

Thank you for considering my comments.

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