



The Oregonian, March 24, 2021:

IN OUR OPINION

Open new paths from the streets to permanent housing

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As Portlanders who love our city and our neighbors — including those living with the indignity, insecurity and physical exposure of houseless life on the street — we must collaborate to solve our houselessness crisis and ensure a safe, decent place to live for all residents.

We strongly support the Shelter to Housing Continuum proposal, which would help us address homelessness by expanding shelter and low-cost housing options. We also urge the adoption of recommendations developed by Portland: Neighbors Welcome, Community Alliance of Tenants, Shelter Now, PDX Shelter Forum, and the Interfaith Alliance on Poverty. Readers can find the amendments at s2hc.pdxshelterforum.org.

There is controversy about the proposal permitting shelters as a temporary use (up to 180 days) in land zoned as open space, which makes up the majority of publicly-owned land in Portland. This land includes natural areas, parks and other vacant government land such as next to transportation infrastructure.

The provision was included to allow for continued use of our community centers as warming and cooling shelters in severe weather.

While we understand the concerns, given the complexity of solving houselessness it would be premature to prohibit all shelters from open-space zoned land without even inventorying and examining the potential sites. Taking public land off the table for sanctioned villages narrows our options and will not reduce unsanctioned camping.

We have so many unsanctioned camps in/near parks and natural areas because we are not responding to the needs of the

community by providing alternative shelter options. Recent court decisions state we cannot require people to leave an area unless we provide other accommodations. Given no other options, people will continue to camp in natural areas and in/near parks unsanctioned.

Our community needs the ability to create a continuum of shelter and housing options that recognizes that people have different needs, capabilities and desires. We have seen in recent years how innovative shelter solutions such as the Kenton Women's Village in North Portland and the Agape Village in Southeast Portland have helped create stability and community for those who are houseless. The City Council should allow such villages permanently on open sites that are not natural areas or parks. Government approval would still be required and should be accompanied by community conversations.

We propose that the city also expand the kinds of accommodations it would allow as part of the Shelter to Housing Continuum plan, by specifically legitimizing the use of permanent structures such as small houses, instead of just temporary structures (e.g. tents, yurts, vehicle dwellings).

The plan should also allow for permanent villages rather than insisting that they be just temporary/shelter installations. The city could incorporate these solutions in the next iteration of its Residential Infill Project, an ongoing effort to review housing types and density in neighborhoods throughout the city. Together these changes could greatly help the plan before Council to fulfill its goal of supporting transition "from shelter into permanent housing."

Like many Portlanders, we are ready to collaborate on this issue to help those who are suffering and to feel confident as a community that we are making substantive, lasting progress. It is critical to act swiftly and with conviction to address this crisis with solutions that match the emergency, and that's what the Shelter to Housing Continuum plan accomplishes.