

# Considering Wapato: A bad idea for the homeless

When one advocate brought a petition to Street Roots and others in the community hoping to gather public support for the Wapato Jail, an empty facility in far out North Portland, to be turned into a 525-bed homeless shelter, honestly, we didn't think that much about it.

Months later that same petition has now been adopted as a rallying cry by the Portland Business Alliance and nearly 3,000 petition gatherers who think it's an idea worth considering. The Portland Tribune is now calling for an open forum to discuss the possibility of Wapato being used as a mass shelter.

It's a bad idea for many reasons, the biggest being it's in the middle of nowhere.

The Wapato facility is 22 miles from Gresham, a city badly in need of more shelter. It's 11.7 miles from downtown Portland.

The location of Wapato has very limited transportation options. During the weekdays there's one bus line. It comes every hour and takes more than an hour to get to Wapato from downtown alone. During the weekends, there's no service at all.

Not to mention that Wapato's location is completely isolated from the rest of the community. There are no public businesses, including a grocery or convenience store, for miles. In fact, there's nothing but industrial flatlands and greenspace around it. Siting a mass shelter at Wapato would be nothing short of warehousing the poor far, far away.

If that's not enough for you, there's more.

A report released in November by Multnomah County, evaluating the possibility of Wapato being used as a homeless shelter, says it would cost the county millions to release the county from the bond obligation and simply get the facility online and operating: All of this with the expectation that cash-strapped nonprofits and agencies would expend valuable resources – better spent on direct needs – simply getting to the remote location and staffing an ill-furnished facility.

People argue that a roof and cot are still better than a tarp on the cold ground. Of course, but the fact is – were it not for neighborhood blowback on locating a shelter facility – the roof and cot are the easy part. It's providing support and empowerment, and repairing individuals and families after the trauma of the streets, that demands the real investment toward ending homelessness.

Currently, local government and nonprofits are implementing a very complex plan called A Home For Everyone. The plan has been bolstered by the homeless emergency, declared by the city of Portland and Multnomah County. It calls for an additional \$30 million in resources this upcoming budget cycle.

A part of that process is identifying all of the resources possible, including land and space for shelter and affordable housing to support people experiencing homelessness. Part of the shelter strategy is to locate services across a broad geographical area to support people getting inside. Concentrating those resources in Wapato would create a vacuum across the entire metro area.

Since the homeless emergency was declared this past fall, local government has added 160 temporary women's shelter beds in Southwest Portland and 13 veterans' shelter beds downtown. In February, a new facility for family shelter in East Portland/Gresham will open and 100 more temporary shelter beds will be added downtown.

The new beds were added with little front-end investment and will cost only a fraction of what it would cost to get Wapato up and running. That doesn't even include ongoing operating costs.

If the community were to centralize our money and efforts into opening Wapato as a mass shelter, it would not only be a horrible investment strategy; we would effectively be cutting off the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in Multnomah County.

Did we mention there's not one men's homeless shelter in Beaverton? Not one. Meanwhile, Gresham and Milwaukie have few options for people experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, some advocates and the Portland Business Alliance won't let Wapato go.

In a letter written to County Chair Deborah Kafoury in November, the Portland Business Alliance said, "We are gravely disappointed to receive the county's memo outlining perceived barriers to the use of Wapato as a facility-based shelter with services."

The Portland Business Alliance goes on to say that the county should pay for the entire facility and operations of the shelter and, while the transportation issue isn't ideal, "if services are offered onsite, the need for transportation options will decrease." They go on to say that exploring a shuttle option might work. Another cost to the county, throwing good money after bad.

It's a nightmare scenario.

That's not to say the Portland Business Alliance isn't working on solutions to find more shelter beds. In fact, just this month the Alliance worked with the city to help facilitate a new temporary shelter to be opened downtown at Southwest Fourth Avenue and Washington Street. We appreciate the leadership.

With the homeless emergency being declared, we have momentum on our side. Let's harness our collective passion and resources to not only do the right thing, but to do the smart thing.

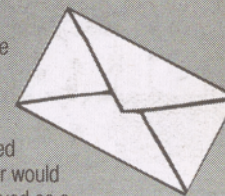
Unfortunately, opening the Wapato jail as a mass shelter is bad policy and should be forgotten about. Let's move on.

## EDITORIAL

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### Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, [joanne@streetroots.org](mailto:joanne@streetroots.org). We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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