

The murky future of Terminal 1

In June, I wrote about a new proposal by developers Homer Williams and Dike Dame. The original idea was a \$100 million plan to build space for 700 new shelter beds and create 700 beds in dormitory-style housing — \$60 million of which they had agreed to

raise. The other \$40 million would need to be raised by government.

The location that was identified by the developers is Terminal 1, an industrial warehouse in Northwest Portland next to the Willamette River.

In the short time since, the plan has changed significantly. Now it's unknown how much money will be raised and if any government money will go toward the proposal. The number of beds planned for the shelter has been scaled back from 1,400 to 400 total.

Let's be clear. We aren't talking about a shelter in a traditional sense. We're talking about an industrial warehouse that would be potentially outfitted with portapotties and propane heaters.

It's been speculated that anyone from Right 2 Survive (the organization behind the Right 2 Dream Too rest stop), to other homeless advocates, to a traditional shelter provider would actually run the facility. Nobody really knows. The details are murky.

That's why it came as somewhat of a surprise that City Commissioner Dan Saltzman and the Portland Housing Bureau decided to come forward with a proposal and vote to transfer the industrial land from the Bureau of Environmental Services to the Housing Bureau with the purpose of using it as a temporary shelter.

The proposal is half-baked at best.

The site poses several problems, including environmental concerns, transportation issues and the zoning permits that it would require to turn the land from industrial use to essentially mass residential.

It's also unclear how one might go about managing a site of 400 vulnerable individuals and families on the streets. That's a big lift. Some traditional social services have balked at the idea, saying that any investment by wealthy developers should go directly to increasing the affordable housing stock that's necessary to move people off the streets.

A loose band of homeless advocates have come together to determine the best way forward given the circumstances.

I talked with Homer Williams and consultants for more than an hour last month about the project. Seeing a major contribution from the business community like this is fantastic. Obviously, having someone like Homer come forward to motivate people to take action is amazing. Saying that, the devil is in the details.

Building a massive shelter with one-time private investments is one thing, but with no long-term plan, short of hanging it around the city's neck as another ongoing funding obligation and resource liability, it's reckless.

Street Roots' recommendation at the time was that if the business community wanted to

truly commit to curbing homelessness, developers would have much more of an impact with \$100 million to build affordable housing throughout the city.

Much of the business community is at a crossroads when it comes to the issue of the housing crisis. It's a new era in Portland, and many people are being left behind. It's real. The scale of people suffering or being displaced is enormous. People's wages are lagging and the cost of housing is skyrocketing.

We need radical housing reform in Oregon, including tenant protections, rent control and other methods to protect residents who are simply struggling to survive. The need for more affordable housing is a given at this point.

Several questions arise from the current proposal.

How do two wealthy developers walk into City Hall and begin to drive public policy in a way that has zero accountability? I suppose money does talk. Still, I can't think of a time when so much political capital was spent on an idea without a clear strategy or plan on how to accomplish the goals set forth.

Moreover, it's unclear what the project's goals actually are. Some advocates have argued it's the best we're going to get given the circumstances. Politicos argue it's a housing emergency and everything must be on the table.

There's no question we have a humanitarian crisis with thousands of people on the streets.

On one hand we have a system that is increasing enforcement and criminalization efforts. On the other hand we have a system that is screaming "uncle" and saying they care about the people and the answer is now to put those people into a mass shelter.

We do need organized camps in our city. It's not that it's ideal — it's simply a reality. Having a mass shelter on industrial land isn't an organized camp. It's an attempt to centralize the problem and move people out of sight, especially from along the Springwater Corridor and a gentrifying Old Town.

It would be easy to go along with the wave of political support to create shelter by any means necessary.

Fortunately, Street Roots learned a long time ago that getting swept away in the moment or being influenced by money isn't the answer to solving homelessness. All that matters to Street Roots is supporting the best outcomes for people on the streets.

Saying all that, if, after overcoming the many hurdles the project faces, including raising money free of tax dollars and legal challenges, the project is still standing, it's Right 2 Survive that can make it happen. I believe with all my heart that Right 2 Survive has the best interests of people on the streets in mind. They live it, every single day.

It's a tall mountain to climb, no question, under the microscope of the media and entangled in a political environment that is explosive. Whether the project is successful or not, we'll still find ourselves in the same situation. It's housing and housing alone that will end people's homelessness. We've got our work cut out for us.

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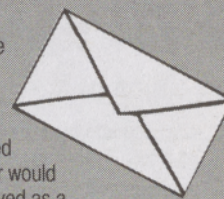
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