

Real opportunities, not a jail, will spur change

The idea of Wapato Jail, an empty facility in far out North Portland, being used as a homeless shelter just won't die.

At this point, the issue is nothing more than a political football. It's wasted political energy for an effort that doesn't offer our community any real solutions to actually ending people's homelessness.

In January, I wrote that it's a bad idea for many reasons. The biggest being 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.

Wapato's location is completely isolated from the rest of the community. There are no public businesses, including a grocery or convenience store, nearby. In fact, there's nothing but industrial flatlands and green space surrounding the facility. Siting a mass shelter at Wapato would be nothing short of warehousing the poor far, far away.

It's easy to think that creating mass shelter is a viable solution to ending people's homelessness. It is not.

That's not to say that creating more shelter beds for people on the streets shouldn't be a priority. In the past 18 months the city and Multnomah County have created 420 new shelter beds with another 120 coming in mid-November. Those beds include shelter beds for domestic violence survivors, families and vulnerable residents from around our region.

The real problem is that some of our key strategies to end homelessness are being threatened due to the lack of housing stock in our community. One of the biggest strategies our community has used over the years is providing people with short-term rent assistance. Unfortunately, with nearly a zero vacancy rate, skyrocketing rents and a growing homeless population, we aren't able to place people into temporary or permanent housing at the rate we were just two or three years ago. It has created a humanitarian crisis on the streets.

It's one of the reasons the housing bond and new housing legislation in Salem becomes a critical tool in creating more housing that is deeply affordable in our community for those who are living on fixed incomes and can't afford current rents under any circumstances. Many of these individuals are vulnerable seniors, people experiencing a high level of trauma,

including domestic and sexual violence and working families who have literally been priced out of their neighborhoods.

That's why I was sad to see a candidate running for Multnomah County Commission be naive about the circumstances we find ourselves in.

Eric Zimmerman, the county candidate, recently told the Willamette Week: "It's OK for this community to say you cannot just camp everywhere. We owe it to the city overall, the county overall, to say we want our parks back. We want our streets back. If someone does not want to be sheltered in our community, they don't want to work toward more stability, then they would have a choice to leave this community. I don't think that sleeping in the middle of any one of our parks is something we should be agreeable to."

Oh boy.

That sounds an awful lot like saying to Multnomah County residents forced to live the hell that is homelessness that if you don't get with the program, you can get out of Dodge.

The last thing our community needs currently is increased criminalization efforts of the homeless. We have 30 years of failed policy to show for it. Putting people in jail, who have literally nothing, is inhumane, costly, and creates more barriers to ending an individual's homelessness.

In fact, Street Roots and other organizations led by Right 2 Survive, an advocacy organization in Portland, is helping lead the campaign for the Right 2 Rest Act in Salem this upcoming legislative session. The goal is to limit local communities ability to criminalize people experiencing homelessness when the community can not provide enough housing.

The harsh reality is homelessness isn't pretty. The issues we are facing right now in our community feel monumental. Perhaps they are. Neighbors and businesses are frustrated. People on the streets are suffering. The media is swarming. Elected officials are scrambling.

We ultimately have two options. We can continue to be divided as a community or we can come together. The problems we face aren't easy or will they be solved tomorrow. In fact, they may get worse before they get better.

Saying that, it will take a village. It will take all of us coming together across political ideologies and class lines to create momentum to help save the city we all love. That means all of us working together and moving in the same direction. It also means not using people experiencing homelessness as a political football. It means giving people on the streets better opportunities in our community, not a bus ticket out of town or a jail facility on the edge of town. It means working to give people a safe place to call home.



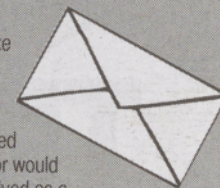
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