

Portland's shelter wars

Sometimes welcoming, other times hostile, neighborhood associations demand a say over bringing homeless programs into their backyards

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On Jan. 25, when Multnomah County commissioners approved a shelter for 100 to 120 homeless people in Southeast Portland, neighbors' mixed reactions were emblematic of the conflicts between neighborhood associations and efforts to shelter the city's homeless population.

Dozens of residents from the Foster-Powell and Mt. Scott-Arleta neighborhoods attended the Board of Commissioners meeting to testify for or against the shelter.

When the commission voted in favor of leasing the building – a former grocery store that sits abandoned at Southeast 61st Avenue and Southeast Foster Road – some booed, others hissed and a couple of people threw up their hands or shook their heads. There was also some applause.

The shelter, which is slated to open sometime this fall, has become a lightning rod of controversy among neighbors, making Foster-Powell and Mt. Scott-Arleta the latest neighborhoods to become embroiled in how, and whether, homeless services will be added within their neighborhood.

The rancor is reflected in a poll conducted by DHM Research and released in late January to KGW. The poll was about the homeless crisis, and it showed that the vast majority of Portlanders are dissatisfied with the way it is being addressed.

According to the poll, most Portlanders see homeless people five times a week; of those respondents, 75 percent indicated they felt compassion toward homeless people. Sixty-four percent of respondents do not talk to homeless people, and 67 percent oppose homeless camps in their neighborhood.

Far fewer Portlanders have taken any action. Less than 15 percent of respondents contacted elected officials in regards to homelessness.

"There's a lot of opportunity for people to be engaged in their own lives to help address homelessness that don't require action from city leaders," John Horvick, vice president and political director of DHM Research, told KGW. "The data suggests most people aren't doing something."

A steering committee, which will include residents of the Foster-Powell and Mt. Scott-Arleta neighborhoods, has formed to flesh out how the shelter will function.

How neighborhoods can be involved in a process to create a homeless shelter or other service is uncharted territory in Portland; that is largely left in the purview of government and social services. But as homeless shelters and other services become more common in every part of the city, residents are demanding involvement, government transparency and solutions.

Portland's 95 neighborhood associations can be forces to reckon with. Forming in the 1960s as political activist organizations, they most famously banded together to fight the proposed Mount Hood Freeway, an eight-lane super highway that would have run along Southeast Powell Boulevard and connected downtown Portland to Interstate 205. Nearly 1 percent of Portland's stock – about 1,750 homes – would have been demolished.

The proposal to build the freeway died in 1974. And instead, the transportation dollars went toward building Portland's first MAX light rail, which neighborhood associations also had a hand in advocating for.

No single issue has brought Portland's neighborhoods together in the same way that the Mount Hood Freeway did. For the most part, neighborhood associations are involved in land-use, zoning and transportation issues, as well as sponsoring neighborhood-wide events, such as Easter egg hunts or cleanup days.

But the city's neighborhood associations remain the squeakiest of wheels when the occasion rises.

When it comes to homelessness, Portland's neighborhoods have typically resisted programs proposed in their areas. In 2010, outcry from residents of the Westmoreland neighborhood quickly dispatched a proposal spearheaded by Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish to start a car-camping program, modeled after a longtime program in Eugene, that would allow homeless people to sleep in their cars in church parking lots overnight.



The Kenton Women's Village provides housing for 14 women in tiny houses. Throughout the process of getting neighborhood support for the project, many Kenton residents who were originally opposed to the village changed their minds after learning more about the village and about homelessness.

Actions from within neighborhood associations have also generated controversy and rancor. Last summer, the Montavilla Neighborhood Association passed a resolution asking the city to stop sweeping homeless camps in the neighborhood, a move that created some chaos on the neighborhood association's board. Many members either resigned as a result of the outcry or were voted off the board.

Around the same time, the wealthy Laurelhurst neighborhood, in response to increased public urination, defecation and theft near Laurelhurst Park, asked the city to create "safe zones" where camping would be prohibited within 1,000 feet of schools and parks.

The Portland city officials refused to consider the ordinance.

The city also quashed the Overlook Neighborhood Association board's attempt to change the definition of membership in the neighborhood to exclude people experiencing homelessness, including the residents of Hazelnut Grove, a nearby homeless village.

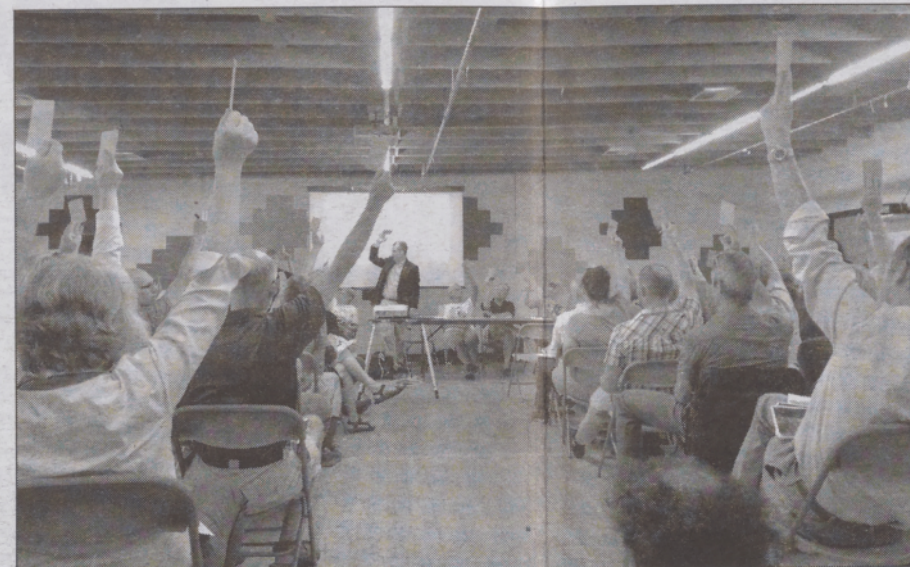
The move would have discriminated against homeless people on the basis of

income, Portland's Office of Neighborhood Involvement informed the association in an Aug. 11 letter. The city threatened to no longer recognize the neighborhood association if it passed the rule.

During a meeting Aug. 15, Chris Trejbal, the Overlook association's chair, did not mince words, describing the city's response as "heavy-handed" and calling Portland City Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, who oversees the Office of Neighborhood Involvement, "a bully."

One reason Portland neighborhoods are becoming more involved in homeless issues is simply that homelessness is more pervasive in each neighborhood.

Up until a few years ago, homelessness was noticeable mostly in downtown Portland, where the bulk of social service agencies are located, and inner Southeast Portland. That is no longer the case; homelessness affects every part of the city, with people camping in parks, along sidewalks and in the doorways of businesses.



Members of the Overlook Neighborhood Association in Portland vote on a resolution that would have required Hazelnut Grove, a tiny-house village in the neighborhood, to be removed by the end of the year.



Hazelnut Grove, a homeless village in Northeast Portland, was the target of Overlook Neighborhood Association efforts to remove homeless communities from the neighborhood. The city has thwarted such an attempt.

residents could start discussing what, if anything, the neighborhood could do.

But before the Foster-Powell neighborhood could hold the forum, the city of Portland, Multnomah County and the Joint Office of Homeless Services began moving forward with opening the shelter at Southeast 61st Avenue and Southeast Foster Road.

On Dec. 8, Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury and Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler sent a letter addressed to residents living near the shelter, announcing the intention to open the shelter at the location. They invited residents to a Dec. 18 community forum.

Balla said he and other neighborhood association board members found out about the meeting via the association's Twitter feed.

"I was a little surprised," he said.

Four days before the meeting, the Joint Office of Homeless Services published a two-page "frequently asked questions," which included information on how homeless people would get into the shelter and the kind of amenities that would be available to them. The hope was that the information would allay residents' concerns.

But the Dec. 18 meeting was tense. Close to 150 people packed inside the SEIU's main meeting hall. Hundreds more lined up

outside Laurelhurst Park but were stopped from attending because the room had reached capacity.

One resident asked how likely it was that the shelter would open. Kafoury responded that it was inevitable that a shelter would open at the site.

As Kafoury spoke, her voice was drowned out by booing, but she wasn't necessarily surprised, she told Street Roots.

"I think they're afraid of the unknown," she said. "They don't trust government. They see all these social ills occurring, and they don't see that government is working hard enough to change it."

She said she also recognizes that Foster-Powell is one of the outer Southeast Portland neighborhoods that "has been promised things over and over from the city and it hasn't materialized."

In early January, the Joint Office published another fact sheet about the shelter, this time including information about how the location was chosen, how nearby businesses and residents could be affected and how that would be dealt with, what the timeline was and whether there was opportunity for engagement.

Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson believes that if more of that information had been available in early December, a lot of tension and acrimony

regarding the Foster shelter likely could have been avoided.

"That was a learning lesson for us," said Vega Pederson, who served on her own neighborhood's board, the Hazelwood Neighborhood Association, before becoming a county commissioner.

Kafoury said some residents think that every facet of the shelter has already been decided, which she emphasized is not the case.

"We don't have all the answers," she said. "We don't want to have all the answers. We want to leave the ability for ... stakeholders to shape the program."

Marc Jolin, director of the Joint Office of Homeless Services, said efforts to work with neighborhood associations and organizations have only just begun.

"We're all learning in this process how best to do the engagement work," he said.

Balla said he doubts his board will take a formal position in support of or opposition to the shelter. Instead, he thinks the neighborhood association will act to "elevate neighbors' voices to the city and the county."

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