

# Deja vu on Wapato shelter. It's still a bad idea.

It's hard to fault politicians for trying to solve two problems with one plan, especially when the problems have been decades in the making, have confounded a generation of office holders, and carry grave financial and humanitarian consequences.

Unless, of course, the plan is a homeless shelter in Wapato.

Wapato, for new readers, is the now legendary boondoggle that happens when big plans to lock more people up collide with financial limits and changing times.

A little history: In 1996, voters approved a bond to build the Wapato Detention Facility, which was completed in 2004.

By then, property tax limits had been put into effect and the county had no money to operate the jail. Used occasionally as a film set, and perhaps more frequently as the butt of a joke, Wapato has never opened as a jail.

And yet again, it is being proposed as a possible homeless shelter by at least two candidates for City Council, Loretta Smith and Stuart Emmons, and more recently a Portland developer. Smith and Emmons each reference Wapato as part of a larger platform of services and amenities to help people in need of housing, health care and stability.

traumatized veterans and people struggling with mental illness are supposed to spend their days or return to every evening – a jail? It's hard to imagine how this is a good location for people trying to plug back into society as they manage their wait lists for housing and recovery services, and find a job or stay employed.

Several of the area's leading homeless and housing service providers have come out against using Wapato as a homeless shelter, including the heads of the some of region's biggest service providers, Human Solutions, JOIN and Transition Projects.

The latest news is that Portland developer Homer Williams, through his nonprofit Harbor of Hope, wants to buy the property for \$7 million. For years, Williams has been proposing grand-scale endeavors for addressing the city's homeless and housing crisis. Underlying those proposals is the perspective of Williams and Harbor of Hope that government and the private sector have to work together to make a difference.

It's true. There is a great deal of promise in Williams' and Harbor of Hope's goals and intentions, and we applaud this commitment to big, creative solutions. But to make Wapato work, how much heaven and earth needs to be moved, and who will be doing the moving? If this is something Harbor of Hope is willing to shoulder with privately raised funds, we'll stay tuned.

But in this peculiar location, could Harbor of Hope solve the issues of transportation, food, access to jobs and the isolated location? Since travel to jobs would be arduous, would investors create new employment opportunities nearby? Harbor of Hope has also explored creating housing. Rather than converting a carceral space into a mass shelter, could Harbor of Hope respond to the local community, creating housing for families trying to keep their kids at Roosevelt and other neighborhood schools?

Because here's the rub: A jail located on industrial land seems suspiciously like a way to hide homeless people from sight. While some advocates of Wapato surely have good intentions, it skews toward NIMBY inclinations: move homeless neighbors out-of-sight and they are no longer neighbors – or neighbors only to the ducks of Bybee lake and the industrial warehouses.

We fear that should our community provide sub-par beds in a site that proves more hardship than remedy, those who refuse it might be put into a more difficult situation. A dangerous outcome could be that those who opt out face draconian responses, because they did not choose to disappear behind the walls of Wapato.

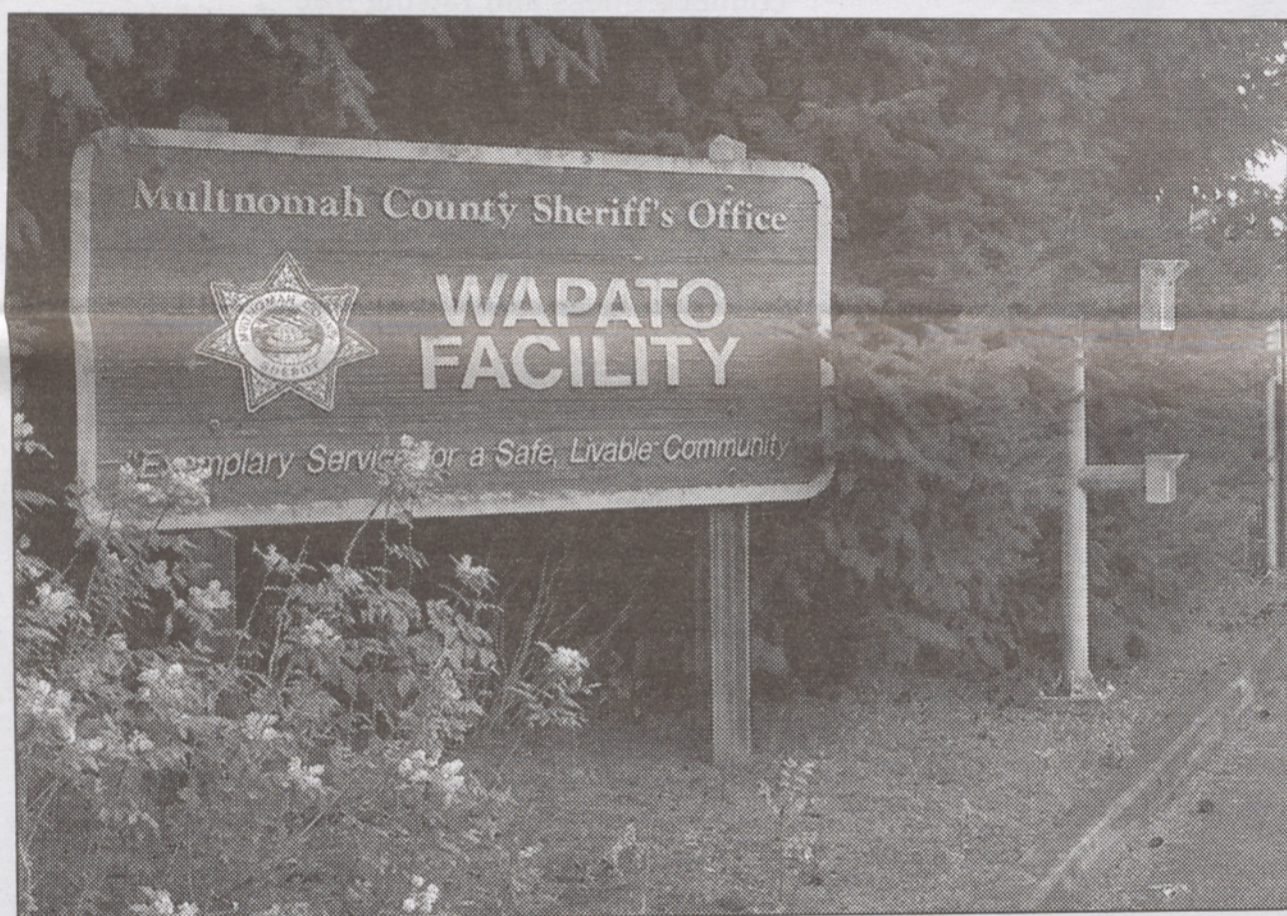
That's not to say that there aren't possibilities, or that given extraordinary measures, something good could come out of this. But is this the place to put those efforts? Why can't we work harder to keep people closer to services, networks and jobs?

Even the people who are considering Wapato as a mass-shelter site acknowledge its shortcomings, but love it or hate it, Wapato does seem to be a trigger for getting people talking about what could be.

Rather than segregate a portion of our city's residents to the edge of town, the city, county, businesses and nonprofits are better off continuing their efforts with a network of localized shelters that help people remain in their community. Because having a support network is key to people feeling stable, secure, trusted and capable.

We all have to keep our eye on the prize, which includes opening up our housing market for all income levels. Wapato is a mess, and it would take a Herculean effort to turn it into something with promise. Anything less sets people up for failure.

## EDITORIAL



The sign outside the Wapato Detention Facility, located in North Portland on the northwest rim of Bybee Lake.

Indeed, the unused building, with space for hundreds of people, including beds, kitchen facilities and bathrooms, is a tempting landing site for the hundreds of people without beds, kitchen facilities or bathrooms on Portland's streets.

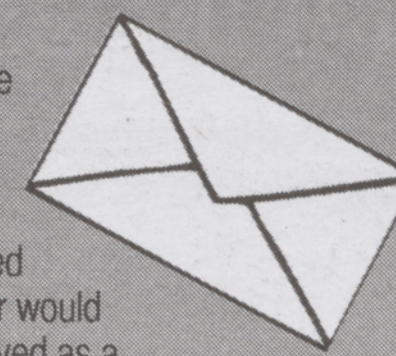
Solutions to homelessness involve addressing the root causes of trauma and detachment. Success relies on restoring a sense of belonging and participation, of feeling trust and being trusted – feeling safe. It is difficult to imagine a place less suited to those needs – one further away from core services and located in a more desolate plot of land – than the Wapato jail.

Fenced off with “no public access” signs and wedged among industrial warehouses and trucks, Wapato is located far from a frequent bus route, far from grocery or convenience stores, basic services, coffee shops, parks and any sense of community. The working homeless – yes, there are many people in our city with jobs but not enough income for housing – need to easily get to work.

The shelter model is a temporary way to stabilize people's lives as they transition into housing. But is this where families will be forced to go when they're evicted from their apartments? Is this where

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