

Don't let Wapato overtake the larger dialogue

It is a story that has covered yards of newsprint – Wapato jail and its possibility for sheltering people who are homeless. And here's the latest: after Multnomah County sold the property to developer Marty Kehoe, he in turn sold an ownership stake to Jordan

Schnitzer, who now is talking of leasing it to Homer Williams. Deals galore.

In recent years, our Street Roots editorial team has raised a number of concerns around this issue, including the isolation

of Wapato from stores, services and bus lines; a concern about motivations to warehouse folks out of sight; and the transformation of a jail into a shelter for people who often are already dealing with trauma. Some folks have described to me how living in a building intended to be a jail might trigger traumas they contend with.

Leo Rhodes, a homeless advocate and Street Roots vendor and former board member, often nudges me to think about something from a different angle, and in this case, he reminded me to consider the potential that the Wapato lot might offer homeless folks who live in cars, mobile homes, and trailers – and who aren't relying on busses. Could they legally park there, and use the facility in ways that work for them?

"What works for one person doesn't work for another," Rhodes said. In other words, could aspects of this be workable for some folks – just not all folks? Can these business leaders be this nuanced and nimble, this responsive to the actual lives of people who are homeless? Can they draw from the expertise of homeless people on their own needs rather than determining outright what's best for them?

Harbor of Hope had a good start last year when it worked with Right 2 Survive's Ibrahim Mubarak and consultant Michelle Kennedy to survey homeless folks on their shelter needs, reporting that people surveyed desired safety and privacy in spaces that did not put too many people in the same sleeping room.

Top choices for shelter locations by those surveyed were downtown, or close to downtown, and near public-transit and services.

None of this describes the Wapato site, so if Williams and Harbor of Hope pursue this plan, they should find a new way to listen to folks who are homeless to find out what about this site works for whom, given its particular challenges.

Any plans should respond precisely based on the needs of homeless folks who would choose to go to this site – such as people who are homeless and have a car.

There are serious reasons why many people would not turn to Wapato as their shelter.

When Wapato is trumpeted as too big of a solution, then I fear that non-compliance could be used as a cudgel elsewhere in the city. If undesirable beds are offered, and people refuse them, their lives must not be further criminalized.

After all, the last thing anyone needs is to walk into a trap, and too often people experiencing homelessness are engaged in a damaging manner. This week, for example, KGW reported that in the process of offering services to people living outdoors on Portland trails, police officers ran warrant checks on homeless campers. This sounds suspiciously like profiling.

Let's strive to make lives easier, not more difficult.

Earlier this month, Harbor of Hope also announced plans for a navigation center under the Broadway Bridge. This is a promising idea. They need to raise funds to make this happen, and aspirations for Wapato should not derail the much more doable navigation center.

There is so much to be done, and plans for Wapato should not overtake the dialogue.

We need many guiding stars shining bright as we address the fact that we live in a city in which so many people simply cannot afford to live indoors.

We should, for example, have the opportunity to vote for a big regional housing bond in November designed by Metro. Now that's a big and promising way forward. Let's give that the attention it deserves.



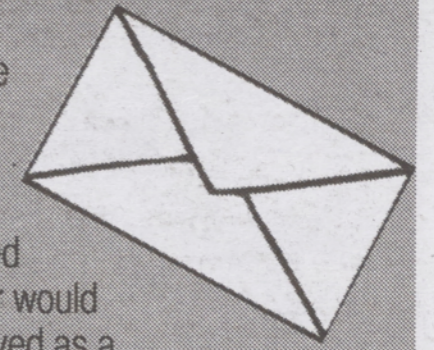
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

Kaia Sand is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach her at kaia@streetroots.org. Follow her on Twitter @mkaiasand

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 Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



Street Roots

211 NW Davis St.
Portland, OR 97209
503-228-5657
Fax: 503-227-3117
www.streetroots.org
www.news.streetroots.org
Hours: 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat. and 7:30-1 p.m. Sun.

Advertising

Interested in advertising in Street Roots? Email Andrew Hogan at andrew@streetroots.org

Staff

Executive Director Kaia Sand
kaia@streetroots.org
Executive Editor Joanne Zuhl
joanne@streetroots.org
Vendor Program Director Cole Merkel
cole@streetroots.org
Development Director Andrew Hogan
andrew@streetroots.org
Senior Staff Reporter Emily Green
Operations Director Sarah Beecroft
Program Assistant Caelin Miltko, Jesuit Volunteer
Vendor Assistant Scott Jackson, Alex Gillow-Wiles
Development Assistant Rosemary Wilson
Editorial Producer Monica Kwasnik
Reporters Sarah Hansell, Leonora Ko, Emilly Prado, Jared Paben, Amanda Waldroupe, Thacher Schmid, DeVon Pouncey, Helen Hill
Photographers Diego Diaz, Arkady Brown, Celeste Noche
Canvasser Desmond Hardison

Board of Directors

Chair Rachel Langford
Vice-Chair Dan Jones
Treasurer Heather Stadick
Secretary Alison Hallett
Directors Michael Anderson, Sandra Hahn, John Brown, Nels Johnson

Volunteers

John Barker, Stacey Heath, Anjali Rathore, Dennis Hogan, Lucas Hawthorne, Thomas Buell Jr., Jason Cohen, Doug Spangle, Susannah Kamala, Jon Raymond, Diana Richardson, Paul and Madeline Gefroh, Mary Anne Joyce, Brooke Anderson, Gillian Floren, Mark Oldani, Bianca Butler, Camber Hansen-Karr, Miranda Woods, Henry Brannan, Helen Hill, Mary Emerson, Brooke Anderson, Kathleen McFall, Robb Hengerer, Maile Yeats-Rowe, Erin Parsons, Faye Powell, Jon Raymond, Danny Moran and Megan Pickerel-Winer. If you're interested in volunteering with Street Roots, please submit a volunteer application at streetroots.org/volunteer. Or you can call for more information at 503-228-5657.

