

# Kotek proposes \$40 million to fight homelessness

Money would pay for new shelters

By **MOLLY HARBARGER**  
The Oregonian

The Oregon Legislature could be poised to make its most significant investment to relieve the effects of a statewide homelessness crisis as House Speaker Tina Kotek prepares a bill that would allocate \$40 million to create new shelters.

She wants the Legislature to pass a bill that would declare a homelessness state of emergency that would allow local governments to bypass zoning restrictions when siting shelters and other critically needed space for homeless people to escape the elements. She also wants the state to provide money to create and operate such places.

Such a state of emergency would have little effect in Portland, which started to ease its zoning restrictions to provide shelters years ago. But it could be a big deal in other communities that have pushed back on allowing public camping but also haven't hosted shelters or public hygiene centers.

While Oregon lawmakers have invested unprecedented amounts in building and preserving affordable housing, the state has spent little on people who have already lost their housing. Gov. Kate Brown touted a \$500 million investment in affordable housing during her tenure at a press conference on Friday.

"That is more than we have spent in the entire history of the state of Oregon from state government, and it still feels like the tip of the iceberg," Brown said.

But the state's biggest investment in homelessness has been 2018's \$5 million. While Brown did not explicitly pledge to push Kotek's plan, she said that she wants to see a bigger investment than has been previously made.

"I'm talking to mayors, I'm seeing the tents. This is a huge problem in every single community around Oregon," Brown said.

Kotek said in an interview that the money would largely go toward getting year-round shelters on the ground by fall in communities around the state that have zero or little capacity. The rest would be used for rapid rehousing — finding housing quickly for people who either have lost or are on the verge of losing their housing — and public hygiene facilities aimed at homeless people.

Kotek faces a short session and a lot of competing priorities.

## Competing priorities

Lawmakers have the power in the coming session to allocate more than \$1 billion that is so far not allocated in the two-year state budget. In formulating that budget, lawmakers intentionally left more than \$500 million in reserve to cushion the state in a possible downturn, however,



The River District Navigation Center will provide shelter beds and on-site services for up to 100 homeless people in Portland.

Molly Harbarger/The Oregonian

and leaders say they want to keep that there.

Since lawmakers passed the budget, state economists have determined the state is likely to collect an additional \$500 million more in revenues than they anticipated at the time the budget was finalized, and lawmakers are likely to spend much or all of that windfall.

That means that Kotek's \$40 million plan for homelessness relief will go up against a proposed \$150 million to \$200 million for wildfire prevention and the pressing need for more money for a behavioral health system that ranks as one of the worst in the nation.

Kotek also wants use revenues and state-backed debt to generate another \$80 million for housing and homelessness bills. She proposes to use that money to help people buy homes. Kotek said \$50 million of general obligation bonds would go toward construction of affordable housing and \$20 million of lottery bonds would go toward saving existing affordable housing.

The Portland Democrat sees an urgency to pass the package of homelessness relief spending now.

Oregon is one of four states where the majority of homeless people — 61% — are living outside, in cars or places unfit for human habitation. As more people become homeless in urban and rural areas, few cities and counties have invested in adequate infrastructure to shelter them.

A statewide study last summer estimated that Oregon needs 5,814 shelter beds to reach adequate capacity. Just more than 20% of those would be for families with children.

While Portland has the largest number of homeless people, smaller cities and rural areas have rapidly rising populations of people who can no longer afford housing. They are forced to camp outside, like in Deschutes County, where many who were not served by one chronically full shelter in Bend moved on to undeveloped high desert land.

Kotek's plan, while still in the works, would largely follow the lines of Portland's. Portland is in its fifth year of a city-only homelessness state of emergency that was intended to allow it to build shelters faster and loosen zoning restrictions.

But Kotek said that she doesn't want to follow Portland's footsteps in spending two years debating rezoning. She plans to sunset the state of emergency provisions for July 1, 2021.

"That is aggressive but we can't go through another winter without more shelter beds," Kotek said.

Kotek pointed to cities such as Salem as examples of why the money should be spent now.

Salem's City Council passed a controversial rule banning people from camping on the sidewalks that police began to enforce in January.

The council promised to build shelters to give

people a place to go. But no shelter space has come through, leaving homeless people with no options.

Mayor Chuck Bennett said he is relieved that Kotek wants to help.

Bennett said that Salem relies heavily on state and federal money and vouchers to house 3,000 people a year. City officials use a small amount of general fund money and give out about \$400,000 in grants to local nonprofits to supplement their social services.

But building a homeless services apparatus is complicated and expensive for a place that mostly focuses on providing water, roads and basic city functions. The Joint Office of Homeless Services was funded with \$75 million last fiscal year, split between the city of Portland and Multnomah County.

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that happen in Salem and Eugene, which recently sent officials to tour Portland's navigation center.

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"If they have funding available for those kinds of projects, it would be tremendously helpful for us," Bennett said.

He also suggested that maybe a declaration of emergency would help the public see homelessness as a crisis, too.

## Opposition to shelters

The state's study of shelters reported that one of the biggest reasons Oregon communities don't have shelter is because of opposition by residents.

"We think this public declaration will be a tremendously positive move especially in local governments' cooperation," Bennett said.

Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury hopes so.

She said that Multnomah County and Portland have long picked up the slack of surrounding communities that don't invest money in homeless services.

"You can see it really closely with Clackamas and Washington counties," Kafoury said. "People come into our area because we have shelter and they don't. I think it's important that every community have some type of plan: if they are a small enough county and they can get people directly into housing, great. If they need shelters while they are working to get them back into housing, they need to do that as well."

She called Kotek on Friday morning to pledge any support possible to make sure the bill passes.

The state of emergency won't include funds for social services. Kotek said that could be part of a future bill, but right now she wants to focus on getting construction started.

"This is definitely a multiyear approach," Kotek said.



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