

Homeless shelter planned for Wapato Jail

Evans a key to project’s success

By **REBECCA ELLIS**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

PORTLAND — On a recent Saturday afternoon, Alan Evans strolled through the hallways of northeast Portland’s Wapato Jail singing Freddy Fender’s 1974 hit “Before the Next Tear-drop Falls.”

Around him, 300 or so curious Portlanders roamed freely through the never-used jail, pressing their faces against the glass panes of the facility’s visitation rooms and meandering through the industrial freezer. All had come to hear Evans’ plan to convert the facility into a massive homeless shelter.

“If you get locked in one of those rooms, we don’t have a key — but we can talk to you through the little phone on the other side,” he joked to the visitors before setting them loose. “I’ve always wanted to be on the visiting end of that.”

The 6-foot-1-inch Evans, with a quick wit and an impressive baritone, had the crowd’s attention. He told stories of living behind bars and sleeping under the Burnside Bridge. He offered up impressive credentials for the job at hand: nearly three decades of living on the street followed by 16 years leading the Oregon coastal homeless service provider Helping Hands.

And he had the latest vision for Wapato: He wants to turn the never-used \$58 million jail into a 155,400-square-foot one-stop-shop service center for the region’s homeless.

He’s calling it the Bybee Lakes Hope Center, a nod, he said, to both the surrounding wetlands and the opportunities that will be offered to all who enter: programs to address mental health issues, addiction and abuse-related trauma.

Cooking classes in the industrial kitchen. A program for residents to learn how to build tiny homes. A vegetable garden. An aviary. And, of course, shelter: roughly 230 beds to start, spread across three of the jail’s wings — one for men, one for women and one for families.

Many in the audience that day said they were taken by the proposal — and the man behind it, who was promising at least a partial antidote to the region’s homeless crisis.

“It’s getting to a critical mass where people are like, ‘Something has to happen. All these people are out on the street,’” said north Portland resident Marian Gallagher, noting a tent city had grown near her neighborhood Rite Aid. “Maybe this can take a chunk out of it. There’s no silver bullet. Try it, measure it, see how it works.”

Kathy Deggendorfer, a Sisters artist and daughter of Columbia Sportswear Co.’s longtime chairwoman Gert Boyle, said she had made the trip to northeast Portland because state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, and real estate developer Jordan Schnitzer — both of whom she knew personally — were standing behind the project. And, after a tour with Evans, so was she.

“You can’t just tread water when the problem just keeps getting worse and worse and worse. I’m going to support somebody who actually makes a positive step forward,” Deggendorfer said. “He’s one of those charismatic leaders. We need a charismatic leader.”

Public problem, private solution

It’s been two years since Schnitzer bought Wapato Jail from fellow developer Marty Kehoe and began scouting for a provider to convert the space into a shelter. In a recent interview,



Alan Evans shows off a rendering of his vision for Wapato Jail.

Schnitzer said his motivations were part moral, part strategic. He said his heart goes out to the people he sees sleeping on the street on his morning commute to his downtown office. The same people, he believes, that are causing the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, named after his mother, to lose senior subscribers and blocking the entryways to storefronts based out of the property he owns.

Schnitzer said he’s considered a series of proposals, but the most promising one had a fatal flaw: it required money from city and county leaders adamant they did not want their stretched-thin funds going to a shelter 12 miles from Portland’s downtown core.

Evans said his plan is different. He’s not currently asking for public money — and has secured the little he is asking for from private donations. While Volunteers of America, the most recent nonprofit to take an interest in Wapato, said they’d need \$18 million annually to run the space, Evans estimates he’d need just \$4 million to get off the ground — \$3.7 million for two years of operating costs and a little left over for renovations.

He said he’s hit his goal with four \$1 million checks: three from local real estate figures — Schnitzer, Portland developer Joe Weston and investor John Niemeyer — and one from an anonymous donor. Plus, a few well-connected Portlanders have agreed to sit on the advisory board: Portland developer Homer Williams, Nike executive Cheryl Hunter, and state Sen. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, and Johnson.

Evans has generated enough initial support that, as of last week, Schnitzer agreed to make Helping Hands a tenant. They’re now negotiating a lease.

Large battles loom ahead, namely a fight to get the industrial area zoned for use as a shelter — not an easy ask from a City Council whose members have insinuated housing the region’s homeless in an old jail was idiotic, ill-informed, and “inappropriate on philosophical grounds.”

Multnomah County has been just as blunt: When Schnitzer announced last fall he planned to raze the building if no provider immediately stepped up, county officials issued a statement, saying they were glad he had “reached the conclusion that he can’t afford to warehouse people in this remote jail.”

Soon after, Schnitzer headed to Clatsop County’s annual Iron Chef fundraiser, where he was starring as a guest judge, and hit it off with Evans. A few million-dollar checks later, Schnitzer’s plan, which just months ago seemed fated to be laid to rest in a pile of rubble, feels more tangible than ever — a reason to celebrate for those who see it as a critical step to addressing the city’s homelessness crisis, and a cause for con-

cern for elected officials who believe, if it gets off the ground, they’ll one day be asked to foot the bill for a shelter they never wanted.

Surviving, then giving back

Before there was Helping Hands Reentry Outreach Centers, there was Thugz Off Drugz.

‘IT’S GETTING TO A CRITICAL MASS WHERE PEOPLE ARE LIKE, ‘SOMETHING HAS TO HAPPEN. ALL THESE PEOPLE ARE OUT ON THE STREET.’ ’

Marian Gallagher | Portland resident

This is when Evans first hit the radar of Seaside Mayor Jay Barber. His wife, who had met Evans while developing a community garden near his shelter, insisted he meet a man with a powerful vision for setting up emergency shelters and reentry housing along the Oregon Coast. Barber resisted.

“I said, ‘I do not want to be involved with somebody whose organization is called ‘Thugz Off Drugz,’” Barber said. “Finally, I relented, and I did meet Alan. And like so many other people, I was taken by his story.”

His story is a powerful one, the bare bones of which Evans readily discussed during an interview at his Astoria shelter.

By the age of 13, Evans said, he was addicted to methamphetamines, a way to numb the severe physical and sexual abuse he’d experienced growing up in Southern California. He spent the next three decades transient, moving through Michigan, Florida, Arizona and Washington state, before landing under the Burnside Bridge.

And then, about 18 years ago, he said he had a reckoning near Seaside. Freezing under a tarp, he overheard a couple leaving home and piling into a packed car, arguing over who was going to check their mail while they were gone.

Once they drove out, he broke in. He found a .22-caliber pistol in the glove box of a pickup truck in the garage, and — realizing he had nobody to call from the landline he now had access to — he debated whether to pull the trigger.

“I chose to live,” Evans said. “But the funny thing about it was that when I tried to get food stamps, they told me I needed an ID. I tried to get ID, they told me I needed a residence. I tried to get a residence, but I had no money.”

He broke back into the house, printed himself an overtly fraudulent check, and delivered it to a local Wells Fargo bank — the only way, he felt, to secure three meals and a bed. The

arresting officer sympathized and instead of sending him to jail sent him to a recovery house. Evans began going to support meetings, got a driver’s license and a job, and, soon after, decided to start an organization that could lift up people who’d been in his position: penniless with a desire to stay sober.

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In the two decades since, Evans, now 56, has seen his organization spread along the Oregon Coast, growing from an eight-bed shelter in Seaside to an 11-shelter operation in Clatsop, Tillamook, Yamhill and Lincoln counties. Their largest shelter in Astoria can fit about 60 people. Supporters such as Barber and Johnson have helped guide the growth, connecting Evans with fundraising opportunities and advising a name change.

Their board, which Barber now chairs, has become a roster of big players in small coastal towns. From Seaside, the police lieutenant and fire chief have joined. From Cannon Beach, the police chief.

From Tillamook, the sheriff. Astoria Police Chief Geoff Spalding is a new addition.

While Spalding said he was initially apprehensive when Helping Hands came to town a year and a half ago, he’s since been impressed by their “little bit of the tough love philosophy.”

The organization has strict requirements for those who decide to stay long term: daily chores, “highly-suggested” 10 hours of community service each week, job applications submitted until they’re employed. Perhaps most challengingly, residents must remain sober at all times — and prove they’re doing so by passing random drug and alcohol tests.

At the proposed center, staff envisions everyone referred to them will first spend four nights in “emergency shelter bunks” where they can access basic services like food and laundry. After that, they’ll be asked to decide if they want to enroll in the long term reentry programs — and abide by all the rules that go with it.

“They are a good mix of compassion and accountability. They don’t take just anybody. Their model is to turn people’s lives around and not just give a warm shelter for somebody that doesn’t want to do anything,” Spalding said. “They make people follow the rules.”

Others who work with Evans say they’ve been impressed by his business model, which eschews restriction-heavy federal

and state money. Their current \$950,000 annual budget comes mainly from private donors, grants from municipal and charitable foundations and dues that residents pay. Those that are able — usually about 70% of residents — pay \$250 a month, according to Evans. Those that can’t afford it can ask for “scholarships,” which will cover them up to two months, at which point Evans said residents have always been connected with some form of income. The same, he said, would be true of Bybee Lakes.

“The guy keeps opening up new facilities and new locations, in absence of any major funding streams,” said Amy Baker, the head of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, which frequently refers people with mental health issues or substance use disorder issues to Helping Hands shelters. “I think that’s pretty impressive.”

A-game

As January’s open house wound down, Johnson, the state senator from Scappoose, sat at a table in the jail’s entryway chatting as visitors filtered out. She told Evans, who had just come from a TV interview in the room next door, that she’d called Schnitzer to report on the event’s success.

“I told him you were on your A-game,” she said. “And he is as happy as a little clam.”

Supporters of Bybee Lakes are in community campaign mode. So far, they’ve planned four public tours of the jail and two community education events. They have a lively Facebook page and a newsletter. You can now reserve an Eventbrite ticket for a volunteer cleanup day in March and be tasked with pressure washing sidewalks and removing moss.

They’re still looking for more money to make more renovations. But they’re also looking to demonstrate they have a critical mass of community support, which will come in handy for the bureaucratic battles ahead, namely the push to get the space zoned for a shelter.

Johnson said she’s sure they have the support — just look around.

“I’ve been to four of them,” she said. “And each one of them, there are more people and more enthusiasm and more volunteers, more sign-ups, more contributions.”

“So show us an obstacle. We’ll get over it. We’ll go around it. We’ll dig under it.”

Columbia River System Operations

Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Available for review and comment through April 13, 2020

You are invited to review and provide comments on the Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement. This draft EIS documents the evaluation of impacts and benefits of the long-term coordinated water management functions for the operation, maintenance and configuration of the 14 federal dam and reservoir projects that comprise the Columbia River System.

AVAILABILITY AND REVIEW

The DEIS is available for electronic review at public repositories around the region. A list of repositories and additional information is posted on the project website: www.crsso.info.

The DEIS also is available for download from the project website, for electronic download through <https://cdxn.doe.gov/cdx-enepa-II/public/action/eis/search>, and through USB flash drives upon request through info@crsso.info.

COMMENT THROUGH APRIL 13, 2020

Mail written comments to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Northwestern Division, Attn: CRSO EIS, P.O. Box 2870 Portland, OR 97208-2870

Submit comments online through www.crsso.info.

Attend a public meeting to submit written, online, and verbal comments.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

All public meetings will take place from 4 to 8 p.m. Verbal comments may be provided at all public meetings privately to a stenographer at any time, or in a public session to a court reporter starting at 5:20 p.m. Those wanting to provide verbal comments publicly must sign in to receive a ticket. Speaking order will be determined by a ticket drawing.

For Americans with Disabilities Act accommodations, please call 800-622-4519.

MARCH 17, 4 TO 8 P.M. RED LION HOTEL 621 21ST STREET LEWISTON, IDAHO	MARCH 18, 4 TO 8 P.M. RED LION HOTEL 1101 N. COLUMBIA CENTER BLVD. KENNEWICK, WASH.	MARCH 19, 4 TO 8 P.M. HILTON SEATTLE AIRPORT 17620 INTERNATIONAL BLVD. SEATTLE, WASH.
MARCH 25, 4 TO 8 P.M. DOUBLETREE CITY CENTER 322 N. SPOKANE FALLS COURT SPOKANE, WASH.	MARCH 26, 4 TO 8 P.M. RED LION HOTEL 20 N. MAIN STREET KALISPELL, MONT.	MARCH 31, 4 TO 8 P.M. OREGON CONVENTION CENTER, PORTLAND BALLROOMS 777 N.E. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. BLVD. PORTLAND, ORE.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bonneville Power Administration prepared this DEIS in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act in response to the need to review and update management of the Columbia River System. Information gathered through this process will inform future decisions and allow for a flexible approach for the agencies to meet multiple responsibilities. The co-lead agencies will respond to comments in the final EIS.

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