

Building a Better City



Carlos, a homeless man stands in front of his tent in Portland, Ore., June 4, 2021. City Council members in Portland have voted to allocate \$27 million of the city's budget to build a network of designated camping areas for homeless people. (AP Photo/Paula Bronstein, File)

\$27 Million approved for new homeless camps

(AP) — City Council members in Portland, Oregon, have voted to allocate \$27 million of the city's budget to build a network of designated camping areas for homeless people, approving a fiercely disputed budget measure as the city tries to address its homelessness crisis.

The money will help finance a measure passed by the City Council earlier this month that banned street camping and approved the creation of six outdoor sites where homeless people will be allowed to camp. Under the measure, a ban on street camping will phase in over the next year and a half as the sites are completed.

Before Wednesday's vote, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler acknowledged the measure was controversial but that he nonetheless believes in it "very, very deeply." Wheeler and other supporters of the measure contend it will make streets safer and connect homeless people with social services.

"We must end self-directed, unsanctioned camping in the city of Portland," he said. "We deal with mental health issues. We deal with substance abuse issues. We deal with human feces. We deal with naked people running down the street, people who are unable to even acknowledge who or where they are, because their afflictions are that serious. It is beneath us as a moral and ethical society to have that happening in our community. And therefore we need to do something differently."

The \$27 million will help launch the first three campsites, with nearly half going toward their operational costs for the remainder of the fiscal year. About \$4 million of it will be

directed to the sites' preparation and construction.

Wednesday's measure amended the city's budget for the current fiscal year to include the new projections.

Public opposition to the measure and the money that will fund it has been heated, with critics saying it will criminalize homelessness and fail to address its root causes.

The initial vote on the budget measure was postponed after a raucous City Council meeting during which some who opposed the plan interrupted council members and had their microphones cut after refusing to abide by time limits in emotionally charged testimony. The commotion prompted members to leave the chambers and conduct the rest of the meeting online.

During that meeting, resident Shannon Kearns said in testimony that the plan amounted to "putting money into internment camps under the guise of support for our most marginalized community members."

The six designated campsites will initially serve up to 150 people, with 24-hour management and access to services such as food, hygiene, litter collection and treatment for mental health and substance abuse.

The location of the sites and the exact details of how they will work have yet to be confirmed, but Wheeler's office has unveiled a potential roadmap in recent Zoom calls with community stakeholders.

So far, the city has envisioned camps that would not allow walk-ins; people would have to be referred by outreach workers. Alcohol and drugs would be banned in common areas. Sites would only have one entrance and exit, and weapons checks would be conducted there.

Service providers running the sites would be responsible for se-

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