

Portland homeless crisis sows dissent

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — There have always been homeless people in Portland, but last summer Michelle Cardinal noticed a change outside her office doors.

Almost overnight, it seemed, tents popped up in the park that runs like a green carpet past the offices of her national advertising business. She saw assaults, drug deals and prostitution. Every morning, she said, she cleaned human feces off the doorstep and picked up used needles.

“It started in June and by July it was full-blown. The park was mobbed,” she said. “We’ve got a problem here and the question is how we’re going to deal with it.”

The city is booming, and the homeless are more visible than ever before. Skyrocketing rents, crippling low vacancy rates and a severe shortage of affordable housing are forcing Portland to re-examine its live-and-let-live attitude in a place where residents have long been tolerant of everything but intolerance.

And in a city where the mayor says “unhoused” instead of homeless and where tent camps have names like Dignity Village and Right 2 Dream Too instead of Skid Row and The Jungle, residents are wondering if Portland needs to rethink its strategy as a permanent solution seems ever-more elusive.

“The city doesn’t have a coherent approach to ... really enforcing any type of rules about where people can camp,” said Chris Trejbal, who lives near a homeless camp called Hazelnut Grove.

“It’s been a disaster. There’s no leadership.”

The issue peaked this year when Portland declared a



AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus

In this Aug. 10 photo, Deitra Schmer watches as her granddaughter, Andrea Brown, brushes her hair and grandson Adrian Atkinson, right, looks on in Schmer’s tent in a homeless encampment along the Springwater Corridor bike and pedestrian trail in Portland.

homeless state of emergency and Mayor Charlie Hales made it legal to sleep on city streets.

At the same time, Portland welcomed 1,000 new residents a month and the average rent has increased about \$100 a month. The metropolitan area needs 24,000 more affordable housing units; vacancy rates are some of the lowest in the nation.

“It’s white hot, people want to move here and live here, as well they should. It’s an amazing city . but our zoning and our planning process is really behind the curve in terms of providing flexible and affordable living arrangements,” said Mayor-Elect Ted Wheeler. “It has not caught up with the new reality.”

Part of that reality is the nearly 1,900 unsheltered people who camp from Portland’s downtown core to its rapidly gentrifying neighborhoods to the forested areas along the urban fringe. A one-night count last year found the overall

number of homeless people hasn’t increased significantly, but the number of chronically homeless has risen steadily to make up about half of the total population.

Portland has earmarked \$250 million for affordable housing and has a \$250 million housing bond on the November ballot.

The city has also joined forces with Multnomah County to tackle the crisis head-on with \$43 million in funding; leaders in a new coalition want to cut homelessness by half in three years.

Yet there is a potent belief that the city isn’t doing enough because homelessness suddenly seems everywhere.

There aren’t enough short-term beds while Portland works at long-term solutions. When one camp is shut down, another pops up.

After letting up to 500 homeless people live for months along a 21-mile bike trail in southeast

Portland, the city cracked down and last week uprooted a network of tents, some of them stuffed with armchairs and couches.

Neighbor LaDawna Booze had called police repeatedly to report drug use, theft and excessive noise there.

“I haven’t been out in my own yard in a few years. I feel like I’m watched everywhere,” she said. “It’s changed my life.”

Booze isn’t alone. The issue was a constant in this spring’s mayoral campaign and it dominates the local news. Since June, 5,000 people have called a hotline to complain about homeless camps, according to The Oregonian/OregonLive.

Hales, who dropped out of the race for re-election, has struggled to find a common ground between upset business leaders and homeowners and homeless advocates, who feel the city is shutting the homeless around with no plan.

He was sued after announcing his “safe sleep” policy, but the city was sued again last month after commissioners voted to proceed with plans to turn a vacant industrial warehouse into a 400-bed homeless shelter.

Suggestions to house the unsheltered in a mothballed jail have been slammed for symbolically criminalizing homelessness but a state land use board killed a plan last week to move a city-sanctioned tent village to industrial land.

“You’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t so you’d better ‘do,’ because no good deed goes unpunished when it comes to homelessness,” said Hales, who ended the ‘safe sleep’ policy after six months.

Those on the streets are craving answer as the cold and rain of a Portland winter approach.

SWIFTS: Population falls about two percent every year

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warmth or perch by wrapping their toes around branches or wires, adapted by clinging to the mortar in brick chimneys and snuggling together to stay warm.

Each year, Vaux’s swifts migrate from as far north as the Yukon to Mexico and back, returning to the same roosting spots year after year. The birds fly a regular route that includes stopovers in La Grande, Chapman School in Portland and Agate Hall at the University of Oregon.

Pendleton had never been a stopover to the club’s knowledge. Then two summers ago, about 500 of the tiny birds descended into the chimney at the Vert Auditorium in downtown Pendleton, attracting the attention of bird club members Aaron Skirvin and Diana LaSarge as they walked to their car from the carnival during Round-Up week. Passers-by stopped and ogled the birds, some mistaking them for bats. Skirvin, who realized they were Vaux’s swifts, described the birds as a twisting, diving horde comprised of what looked like tiny jet airplanes.

The birds, which weigh less than an ounce, fly up to 270 miles a day.

Bird club member Jack Simons came to the Vert chimney the next night to photograph the birds. The swifts arrived about the time a helicopter taking people on sightseeing rides flew

directly over the chimney. The swifts dropped vertically like “500 black ribbons falling as fast as you can imagine.” As the chopper flew away, he said, the birds returned within minutes.

Last summer, bird club members anticipated the return of the tiny aerialists and staked out the Vert chimney night after night. The swifts, however, were a no-show. The club got a later report that the birds had simply moved a couple miles west to the county road facility on Westgate. This year, club members focused on the Westgate chimney.

Simons and his wife, Sharon, watched the spectacle on Monday night, counting almost 400 birds.

“The birds circled for 45 minutes, often flying out of sight, then returning to continue their circling and constant dive bombing of the chimney opening,” he said.

He said they periodically disappeared then returned.

“There were more swifts than before which suggested to us they had gone out to recruit more swifts from outlying areas,” Simons said.

As the air temperature cooled and the light dimmed, the birds got ready to retire for the night.

“The loose-knit flock — about 400 to 500 feet across — suddenly tightened into a whirling mass that was approximately 100 to 200 feet across,” he said. “The obvious

appearance of the spectacle was that of a tornado as they circled faster and faster, then one bird, then two birds spiraled into the chimney entrance followed by the entire flock which we estimated at 380 birds.”

Simons said it took roughly 90 seconds for the flock to drop into the chimney.

Brick chimneys, such as this, are going the way of old growth forests, said Vaux’s swift expert Larry Schwitters, who contracts with the Audubon Society to identify roost sites.

Because of building code changes, “people are tearing them down or filling them up with concrete,” Schwitters said. New chimneys are often lined with smoother tile or concrete.

“The bricks give the little birds something to hold onto,” he said.

Schwitters and other champions of the Vaux’s swift jumped into action after a long-used chimney at Albany Fire Station 11 was demolished this year to make room for a new facility. They created a replacement roost for the 10,000 swifts a few blocks away from the fire station. To attract the birds, Schwitters and company recently placed swift guano inside the 30-foot-tall, faux chimney roost and are broadcasting swift calls nightly.

Time will tell, Schwitters said.

A chimney doesn’t have to be huge to hold thousands of swifts. Schwitters regularly

peeks inside chimneys via video feed such as the one at Monroe’s Wagner Elementary School chimney (visible at vauxshapening.org).

“We see them three deep, birds hanging on birds hanging on birds,” he said.

The researcher said the Vaux’s population falls about two percent every year and currently numbers about 380,000 birds. Since so many congregate in one place at one time, flocks occasionally die in mass wipe-outs. According to Schwitters, several thousand Vaux’s swifts succumbed one year after entering a chimney that was subsequently fired up, causing flaming birds to burst out. In another incident, he said, approximately 1,350 swifts suffocated after flying into a British Columbia chimney that had a lot of ash — the birds were removed in three large garbage sacks.

Simons said he hopes Pendletonians will check out the local swifts before the flock leaves.

“My hope is that hundreds of people can put down their Smartphone and TV remote to take a few minutes to visit this evening spectacle,” he said. “These tiny birds may be here for another week or they may leave tonight to continue their southbound migration.”

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.

HAPPY CANYON: Usually draws larger crowd for the PBR Classic

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tickets combined for the night show, the Lee Brice kick-off concert and the PBR Classic. Both the night show and the PBR events are outpacing last year’s sales, and the Lee Brice concert is only slightly behind 2015’s ticket count.

Neistadt said Happy Canyon usually draws larger crowds for the PBR events, so the facilities and staff should be well equipped to deal with a glut of audience members for the night show.

Happy Canyon’s social media efforts and presence at July’s Pendleton Whisky Fest helped it promote its 100th birthday to a wider audience, Neistadt said, but Happy Canyon’s biggest opportunity came when it performed in front of hundreds of people from the tourism industry at the Governor’s Conference on Tourism in April the day after it accepted the Oregon Heritage Tourism Award.

The Round-Up Association

won a few awards of its own last year, which it is also hoping to use to grow Pendleton’s signature rodeo.

The Round-Up took home the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association’s Large Outside Rodeo of the Year award and the Remuda Award for having professional rodeo’s most consistent pen of bucking stock in 2015, inspiring the members of the Round-Up Board of Directors to challenge each other to improve every facet of the Round-Up, said publicity director Randy Thomas.

Some of the results of those challenges will be on display next week when new features are added to the event.

Thomas highlighted the 1910 Room, a pop-up restaurant in the southeast end of the grandstands where Portland Chef Max Germano will offer gourmet dining options, and the Loading Chute, a bar near the scoreboard where attendees can sip a drink while getting a prime view of the track-side view of the action.

Other changes are less visible but no less significant.

The Round-Up Association has added \$50,000 to the rodeo purse, bringing the total purse to \$550,000, not including the value of the saddles and other trinkets competitors receive as prizes and gifts.

Round-Up General Manager Casey Beard said the higher purse keeps the Round-Up competitive with larger metro rodeos while Thomas added the relative shortness of the Round-Up compared to other rodeos mean contestants get more bang for the buck.

The Round-Up is also looking to build on the stock work that earned it the Remuda Award.

Having become its own stock contractor a few years ago, Thomas said the Round-Up will contract with eight different stock companies with the intent of picking only the healthiest and most well rested beasts.

Each animal will only be a part of one ride, ensuring they stay fresh and give the cowboys

riding them the best chance at a high score.

“You’re going to see just as good a horse on Wednesday as you’re going to see on the finals on Saturday,” Beard said.

Beard said each day of the event has sold better than it did this time last year, and a new wrinkle to the ticket system is bringing more revenue.

Thomas said the \$20 “Let’Er Buck Pass” gives people access to the area outside the arena without a corresponding seat and has sold surprisingly well.

Amidst all the festivities, Thomas said KPTV weatherman Andy Carson will travel from Portland to helm a live broadcast at the Round-Up Sept. 16. The board may have to work on a new set of challenges for next year when the rodeo wraps — the Round-Up has already been nominated for the 2016 Large Outside Rodeo of the Year award.

Contact Antonio Sierra at asierra@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0836.

POOL: Big ticket item includes a larger exhaust fan

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“We asked if they would help us with the balance of those repairs,” said BMCC President Camille Preus. “The answer was yes. They very much want to get back in the pool.”

The parties will pay user fees until the pool closes in two years. The stopgap will allow time to find a viable alternative.

Tony Nelson, a coach with the Pendleton Swim Association, addressed the board.

“We wholeheartedly thank you for the two year opportunity to move forward,” Nelson said. “The pool means a lot to us.”

Veterinarian Fred Robinson, president of the Pendleton Swim Association, also lauded the action.

“We’re ready to write a check,” he said. “We’re ready and willing to do that tonight, if necessary.”

Preus smiled at Robinson, but told him to put his checkbook away. The college will bill the stakeholders when the pool is ready to open.

BMCC will continue to supply pool personnel, basic maintenance and chemicals.

In the next month, the college will address only the pool’s most critical deficiencies such as lead paint and possible areas of mold which will be encapsulated. Ventilation is also an issue. A report from Pacific Coast Air Balancing, which inspected air quality in August, shows that the ventilation system fails to circulate air the recommended six-to-eight times an hour. A lingering chlorine smell indicates that the system isn’t sweeping down low enough to displace stagnant air.

Biggest ticket items include a new motor and larger exhaust fan. The inspector also recommended installing another duct so air could be pulled out of the building from opposite sides of the pool.

The college hasn’t yet gotten formal results of mold testing and plans to test the pool’s water for lead once more test kits become available.

BMCC Vice-President of Administrative Services Tammie Parker is overseeing the information gathering for the college. She said the ventilation report actually wasn’t as bad as feared.

“There’s nothing really wrong with the air you breathe in there,” she said. “The problem is it doesn’t circulate enough.”

The impaired ventilation, she said, could lead to conditions such as swimmer’s ear or exacerbate existing respiratory problems.

Wednesday’s resolution included a caveat that the pool could close earlier “should any major mechanical malfunction occur or any issue surface that would impact pool users’ health and safety.”

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.

TIMELINE: Huston called his mother, then 9-1-1

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had shot guns with friends at this location numerous times,” according to Edmiston.

Huston shot and killed Hurtado with one round from a handgun.

11-11:20 a.m. — Huston drove into Hermiston from the Country Lane location and parked his vehicle in the lot of Foxwood Apartments at West Hermiston Avenue and Southwest 11th Street. He walked about 100 yards to 130 N.W. 11th St., the home of his friend and fellow Hermiston High School volunteer wrestling coach, Ken Valdez, also 45.

Huston kicked in the front door of the home and went to the bedroom where Valdez and Bye were sleeping. Huston shot Valdez at least three times with a Glock 9-mm handgun, killing him, and shot Bye one time in the back. Huston then made at least two phone calls.

“One call to his mother, who in turn called 9-1-1 as she believed something was wrong,” according to the timeline. “The other call he made to 9-1-1 advising there had been a shooting at that location.”

Huston then sat on the bed and fatally shot himself.

Hermiston police officers arrived in the area around 11:20 a.m. and entered the Valdez home. Police gave emergency aid to the wounded Bye before paramedics came after staging a short distance away.

“We are waiting on crime lab analysis to confirm the gun used at the Valdez residence was also the same gun that killed JJ,” according to Edmiston. “We have no reason to believe otherwise, but it is important for us to confirm that. We are also waiting on any information we may be able to access on cellphones involved.”

Edmiston also stated police have not confirmed accounts from associates of Huston regarding his military involvement in the first Gulf War and subsequent treatment from the Veteran’s Administration.

“We do know an incredible amount of pills were discovered at Huston’s residence,” the chief reported. “These pills for things like depression and anxiety appeared to be prescribed by the VA.”

Hermiston police are “navigating the red tape of the VA to try and glean additional information,” he added, and have no timeline on when that may take place.

Edmiston said this is likely the last information he will release unless investigators discover something significant.

“As I have said before,” he stated, “inasmuch as we want to learn the ‘Why,’ we may never get to a point where that is known.”