

Homeless Portlanders worry new shelter will be far from downtown

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By Randy Billings Staff Writer

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Marla Palau has been in and out of Portland's Oxford Street shelter three times over the last 15 years. Her current stay is approaching a year and comes at a time when the city's elected leaders and residents have been embroiled in a debate about where to locate a new homeless shelter.

Palau said she's watched as residents in Nason's Corner, Libbytown, St. John Valley and now the West End and Riverside have risen up in opposition to proposed locations in those neighborhoods. Their arguments are similar: Quality of life and property values will decline, while drug use, public intoxication and crime will increase.

While substance use and mental health issues are not uncommon in the homeless community, Palau wants residents to know that people without homes are as unique and varied as those with homes.

“They’re stereotyping everybody,” the 43-year-old said while sitting with a group of friends in the small courtyard at the current shelter. “They see one person and they think we’re all the same. We’re all not the same people. We all have different values in life.”



Marla Palau, 43, poses for a portrait outside Oxford Street Shelter on Thursday. She wants Portland residents to know that people without homes are as unique and varied as those with homes. “We’re all not the same people. We all have different values in life,” Palau says. *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

But others at the shelter agree that city residents are raising valid concerns about how a new shelter could affect their neighborhood. And most would like to see the shelter remain downtown, where it’s close to other services, rather than end up in Riverton, one of two sites being considered by city councilors.

“I don’t blame them,” Anthena Court said of concerned residents. “Live here and you’ll see why. I wouldn’t want to wake up and come out on my porch and see someone shooting up in my backyard.”

Then, the 40-year-old adds, “I’m an addict and I’m even saying I would be hesitant.”

Portland city councilors on Monday will hold another public hearing about where to build a new 150-bed homeless service center. The hearing was originally scheduled for May 20, but was rescheduled because of city budget deliberations.

The two locations before the council are Angelo's Acre, a gravel parking lot on Commercial Street near the Casco Bay Bridge, and 654 Riverside St., an undeveloped field in an industrial area near the Westbrook city line.

The council could vote on a location Monday, but Mayor Ethan Strimling said a vote could be postponed, since City Councilor Spencer Thibodeau will not be at the meeting.

The shelter debate exploded into the public arena last summer, after City Manager Jon Jennings originally recommended building a 200-bed shelter at the city-owned Barron Center. City officials dropped that proposal amid neighborhood opposition and began their search anew.

The council's Health & Human Services and Public Safety Committee culled an inventory of city-owned and privately held properties down to 15 potential locations. After further research, it winnowed it down to three. The committee removed a potential site next to the Cumberland County Jail from consideration, because of concerns about pedestrian safety and concentrating too many social services in the Libbytown-St. John Valley neighborhoods.

City officials have been looking to replace the Oxford Street Shelter, which has been in Bayside for over 30 years.

The converted three-story apartment building and auto garage, which is leased by the city, can hold 154 people sleeping on floor mats. An additional 75 mats are set up at Preble Street to accommodate overflow and several times a month the General Assistance office is used as a second overflow.

Jennings has said that the current facility is not safe for staff or the people who stay there.

The city is looking to create a new shelter with space for services that are not provided at the current shelter. For example, the new shelter would have 150 beds, rather than floor mats, with space to accommodate overflow. It would have a soup kitchen, medical clinic, rooms for private counseling, an enclosed courtyard and a community policing station, which the current shelter lacks, city officials have said.

In addition to public transportation, the city says it will also use a van to help people make it to appointments. And the city zoning code would impose a list of conditions on a shelter, including having a plan to address any neighborhood concerns that may arise.

The city is also working with Avesta Housing and Opportunity Alliance to create specialty facilities for seniors over the age of 55 and those struggling with mental illness, respectively. Jennings said the city is also working with Community Housing of Maine, which is looking to build 50-60 affordable housing units at two city-owned sites.

Preble Street is also looking to create a women's shelter for victims of abuse and human trafficking.

While the city is promising a totally new shelter model, that message doesn't seem to be getting out to neighborhood residents or shelter guests who worry that the city is simply moving the problems associated with the existing shelter to another neighborhood.

"They never talk to none of us about it," said 62-year-old Cheryl McAllister, who has been staying at the shelter since 2002.

All eight people who spoke to the Press Herald about the possible shelter move on a recent afternoon opposed putting the shelter on Riverside Street. They said it was too far from services, such as health care providers, temporary employment agencies, counselors and the like.

Palau said many shelter guests cannot afford to ride the bus anyway and have to walk to appointments. And a 24-year-old man who would only give his first name, Jason, said a far-flung location would make it harder for people who work temp jobs.

"Not everybody down here is an addict," said Jason, who works temp jobs. "A lot of people here work."

Several shelter guests said that many elderly or disabled shelter residents who can afford bus tickets would not be able to walk the quarter-mile to the bus stop.



Jane Drew, 55, poses for a portrait near the intersection of Cedar and Oxford streets in Bayside on Thursday. "Being homeless is stressful," she says. "Unless you walk a mile in their shoes, don't judge, because it could be you." *Staff photo by Ben McCanna*

Destiny Flaherty, 26, predicted that people would remain downtown, even if the shelter is moved out to Riverton.

"I think that if they move the shelter out what's going to happen is people are just going to start sleeping more on the streets because they're not going to be able to get out there," Flaherty said.

Jane Drew, 55, urged city residents not to judge shelter residents too harshly. She said many people want to work their way out of the shelter, while others get stuck in a cycle.

"Being homeless is stressful," Drew said, adding that many people turn to drugs or alcohol to deal with that stress. "Unless you walk a mile in their shoes, don't judge, because it could be you."

She suggested that neighborhoods focus on ways to make a shelter work, regardless of where it is located.

"Eventually, the neighborhood will have to deal with the location no matter where we are," she said. "And the worries of the stereotype are for the most part unfounded."

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