

The Oregonian

Right 2 Dream Too homeless camp: A year and \$846,000 later, still in same spot

By Andrew Theen
February 25, 2015

Some days, Josh Alpert said, he feels like the most knowledgeable real estate guy in Portland.

For more than a year, Mayor Charlie Hales' director of strategic initiatives has searched for a new home for Right 2 Dream Too, the homeless camp approaching four years at the base of the Chinatown Gate.

He's browsed Craigslist, perused online listings, driven by properties and called would-be sellers, looking for a 10,000-square-foot plot near transit for roughly \$850,000.

"That's incredibly difficult," Alpert said, citing Portland's red-hot real estate market. "The land goes quick, and the land is expensive."

One year after the Portland City Council approved a complex deal that set aside \$846,000 in public money to buy or rent a new home for R2D2, the campers are no closer to leaving Old Town Chinatown - despite motivated parties on all sides.

About 70 people check in each night to sleep at R2D2 in the heart of downtown Portland, inside a fence of colorfully painted doors that block views from Burnside Street. Little has changed.

Elsewhere in the neighborhood, momentum is everywhere. New businesses are opening. The Portland Development Commission is selling off key properties. A plan to remake the Grove Hotel is advancing.

David Gold, an adjacent property owner and developer in Old Town, said R2D2 remains a stagnant presence in a neighborhood that's seen positive change. "I can't say R2D2 is stopping anything specific, but I don't think it's adding anything positive either."

Even complaints about the camp to the city's Development Services Bureau have dried up, with just one filed during the past 12 months.

"People that are concerned about their presence have given up," said Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Housing Bureau. "They've given up on us [city leaders]. I think that has a lot to do with it."

Ibrahim Mubarak, co-founder of R2D2 and the Dignity Village homeless camp in Northeast Portland, said he's noticed a pattern during the past year. "When land is available and we say we want that land, all of a sudden, it's not available anymore."

In addition, he said, donations to the camp are down 30 percent.

"I don't know that people really understood what the money is supposed to be used for," Mubarak said, emphasizing that the money isn't available to R2D2. "The general public says, 'Y'all got all this money, what are you doing?'"

Background

R2D2 set up shop on the 7,762-square-foot former home to Cindy's Adult Bookstore in October 2011. Owner Michael Wright welcomed Mubarak and the homeless community to the empty lot amid the Occupy Portland protests.

The area provides a safe, covered place for people to sleep off the street. Gold said it's the overflow crowd -- those who are turned away and sleep and urinate in doorways -- who pose issues for business owners.

Staffers at the front desk screen visitors, and explicit rules are posted on the front gate. The property includes a portable toilet, recycling bins and garbage containers, tents for those seeking privacy, and large open communal sleeping quarters.

Food and supplies are stored in an employee-only area in back. An office has Internet access for resume writing and job searches. A gravel walkway meanders through the mostly tidy lot.

Last week, Melissa Rodriguez stood outside R2D2, petting the community's unofficial canine mascot, Paige. Rodriguez spent about a year living at site, but has since moved into an apartment with her husband.

She still hangs out at the site occasionally, calling the residents her family. "When I moved in here, it just felt like home instantly," she said. "Everybody cares about you; everybody was here to help you out and protect you no matter what happened to you on the streets."

For years, the city fined R2D2 for violating city code. The fines eventually topped \$20,000, and R2D2 and Wright sued the city.

In September 2013, Commissioner Amanda Fritz announced a settlement agreement and a plan to move the camp to a city-owned parking lot, called Lot 7, under a Broadway Bridge on-ramp.

But developers Homer Williams and Dike Dame, with a Marriott hotel set to open nearby, pushed back, as did the Pearl District Neighborhood Association.

Months later, Alpert helped broker a deal: The developers bought the parking lot for \$142,000, and paid an additional \$896,000 to escape an agreement to pay \$1.5 million for 10 years of parking at a city-owned garage.

The city, in turn, agreed to set aside \$846,000 to find a new home for R2D2. Everyone, it seemed, won.

Saltzman walked out

The City Council vote to approve the deal one year ago was unanimous, once Saltzman walked out.

Saltzman said he couldn't vote in favor. Now, he said, he's not surprised R2D2 is still there. "They're not going anywhere anytime soon," he added.

Last October, the Portland Development Commission signed an agreement with Wright to pay him \$10,000 a month for 30 months -- or, if R2D2 moved, whatever was left of the \$300,000 at once. Wright and his partners would also receive an additional \$1.2 million - as long as R2D2 moved no later than October 2016.

"That will be funny to watch how that plays out," Saltzman said. "My prediction is they're not going anywhere."

What's Next

Fritz said she remains optimistic that the city will find a new home that is "not only better than Fourth and Burnside, but better than Lot 7."

She said one challenge is finding a property that allows a recreational campground permit. Fritz added that despite the outcry from Pearl residents in 2013, she has no plans to appease potential neighborhood opponents.

"I will not be doing extensive public involvement to ask permission of neighborhood associations for something that's allowed by right," she said.

Mubarak said he isn't surprised one year flew by without finding a home. He always figured it would take two years, citing the real estate market and neighborhood opposition as top factors. Even if the camp found a new home, he said, moving and setting up the new site could take months.

But Mubarak said there are plenty of reasons to feel positive. He's flown to Tucson, Arizona; Jackson Mississippi; Brooklyn; Chicago; Denver and other cities to talk about R2D2's success in the past year.

The trips are occasionally funded by nonprofit organizations or cities, Mubarak said. Right 2 Survive, R2D2's parent group, also uses grant funding to pay for his travel if necessary.

Alpert said it's "been made clear" R2D2 must move from the entrance to Chinatown. But given the lack of shelter space and affordable housing, the camp plays a valuable role. Over Thanksgiving weekend, Alpert spent a night at R2D2, and called the experience one of the most eye-opening of his life.

"When you take the politics out of their situation on that location, they are a community asset for us," he said, calling their compassion remarkable.

When asked whether the city will be in the same predicament a year from now, Alpert said: "I certainly hope not."

The Portland Tribune

Share your thoughts with the city on Uber, Lyft, and city taxi regulations

By Steve Law
February 24, 2015

Have a gripe about taxi service in Portland?

Excited — or worried — about a new generation of DIY taxi services such as Uber and Lyft?

The city of Portland wants to hear your thoughts.

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales, City Commissioner Steve Novick and Portland Bureau of Transportation Director Leah Treat will be on hand at a community forum on taxi service Thursday, Feb. 26, from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. The forum takes place at the Portland Building Auditorium, 1120 S.W. Fifth Ave. in downtown Portland.

Citizens will have a chance to share their thoughts in front of the Private For-Hire Transportation Innovation Task Force, appointed by Novick to review taxi regulations and evaluate new services provided by Uber and Lyft.

The two companies, which are shaking up the taxi industry worldwide, allow people to become taxi drivers by turning their own vehicles into taxis. Riders can summons a taxi using their smart phones.

Such services are popular among customers, but considered a threat to longstanding and heavily regulated taxi companies.

City leaders are considering safety and other consumer protection measures that might be adopted in exchange for legalizing Uber and Lyft operations inside the city. The task force, which has been meeting since January, is expected to release its recommendations on new web-based taxi companies in April.

The public can also send comments by email topdxrides@portlandoregon.gov, or by phone at 503-823-5087.

For more information, check portlandoregon.gov/transportation/PDXrides.

Willamette Week

Murmurs: Portland's Policing Of Airbnb? Into Thin Air.

By WW Editorial Staff
February 25, 2015

An independent analysis of Airbnb's Portland hosts reveals only 93 of 2,006 online rentals in the city show they have a city permit to operate legally. That's just 4.6 percent. The city of Portland set a Feb. 20 deadline for Airbnb and other sites to post hosts' permit numbers or face a \$500 fine for each violation. The deadline passed and the city is...shrugging. City Revenue Bureau director Thomas Lannom says he hopes companies will make "a good-faith effort" to follow the rules. "What we're looking for is that they are working with us and trying to comply," Lannom says. "If they appear to be dragging their feet, that is when we can bring and will bring penalties into play." The analysis was done for WW by insideairbnb.com, an interactive tool that compiles data taken from Airbnb's site, and was based on Portland's permit data as of Feb. 21—a day after the city's deadline.

Portland's Deadline for Airbnb Safety Permits Passes Unheeded, But City Won't Issue Fines

Only 4.6 percent of Airbnb rentals in Portland list a permit number, independent analysis finds.

*By Anna Walters
February 24, 2015*

An independent analysis of Airbnb's Portland hosts reveals that of the 2,006 online rentals in the city, only 93—or 4.6 percent—show they have a city permit to operate legally.

The city of Portland set a Feb. 20 deadline for Airbnb and other sites to begin posting hosts' city permit numbers or face a \$500 fine for each violation. The deadline has passed and the city is shrugging. City Revenue Bureau director Thomas Lannom says as long as companies are making "a good faith effort" to make hosts follow the rules, they won't face a fine.

When will the deadline be a real deadline with actual consequences? Lannom won't say. "What we're looking for is that they are working with us and trying to comply," Lannom says. "If they appear to be dragging their feet, that is when we can bring and will bring penalties into play."

The analysis for WW was provided by Murray Cox, who runs insideairbnb.com, an interactive tool that compiles data scraped from Airbnb's site, and was based on Portland's permit data as of Feb. 21—a day after the city's deadline.

Airbnb has met the city's deadline for displaying permit numbers—to an extent.

WW created a test listing on Airbnb and found that although hosts must acknowledge a text box referencing Portland rules—including the permitting requirement—the site still allows hosts to list a property without filling in the "Permit Number" field.

Lannom says he doesn't know how many other short-term rental companies have provided a field for hosts to list permit numbers.

The insideairbnb.com data scrape shows 10 hosts, or less than 1 percent in the city, say they're awaiting city approval. One host wrote in their listing: "Pending since Dec 2014. We haven't heard from city yet though we paid the fee."

Michael Liefeld is in charge of inspecting short-term rentals for safety for the Bureau of Development Services. He says he counts the effort by some hosts to get permits as a victory.

"If somebody said 'I'm working on it'—mission accomplished," he says. "That means they're aware of the permit requirements and they've indicated that they are working on complying."

Portland has given Airbnb unprecedented legitimacy, becoming the first city in the nation where the company is collecting lodging taxes. But previous reports in WW show Portland is beset by scofflaws, including short-term rental hosts who aren't getting city safety inspections and advertise multiple units they aren't living in.

Lannom says the city is not yet compelling Airbnb and other companies to disclose the addresses of their hosts.

"We've not asked for that information, because that's not where I want to start," he says. "I would much rather honor the companies' desire to keep their host information confidential. To the extent that we can't gain compliance, and that we're dealing with a company that's intractable, then at that point we could request that information."

The Portland Business Journal

Portland's tax incentive gamble could nurture more tech companies

*By Andy Giegerich
February 25, 2015*

A Portland incentive program that's an exemplar of polarization — taxpayer advocates hate it while governments and many businesses love it — will get a new hearing this week from the City Council.

The Council plans to pore into the city's enterprise zone program, which offers tax abatements to companies that pledge to expand or set down roots, among other promises, in Portland.

Specifically, the city will consider combining its "Portland Enterprise Zone and East Portland Enterprise Zone" into one strategy that, among other goals, could benefit electronic commerce companies. The Portland Development Commission already passed the changes. The City Council is reviewing the PDC's work Wednesday morning.

The program would still tie into Oregon's enterprise zone program that allows jurisdictions to offer abatements — generally five years — to businesses that create and retain jobs.

The new policy would "specifically call out e-Commerce as a vital part of the program and will align program requirements" with other e-commerce offerings.

Portland's economic officials have long sought to nurture the city's tech community. At the same time, the city is adjusting several strategies as part of the Portland Comprehensive Plan Update.

The City Council will begin exploring the proposal at 10:45 a.m.

GoLocalPDX

Portland Unable to Regulate Airbnb and Similar Companies

*By Joanna Evoniuk
February 24, 2015*

Nearly 90 percent of the home-sharing properties in Portland are operating illegally by not holding permits, according to a GoLocalPDX review of the industry.

Home-sharing companies like Airbnb and their hosts are not complying with all of Portland's rules for short-term rental units, while the City of Portland's attempts to regulate the industry have fallen flat.

The city is trying a new approach to ramp up enforcement. As of Feb. 23 the Portland Revenue Division can fine companies and hosts who are not in compliance with city ordinances for short-term rentals.

"Our goal is to invest the online platforms that facilitate these rentals to have a greater stake in the issue," said Mike Liefeld, enforcement program manager for the Portland Bureau of Development Services. "It gives authority to hold them responsible in hopes to make enough changes.

Despite warnings from the City, there are only 168 permits registered with the city for short-term rental properties out of an estimated 1,600 rentals. Not all companies have responded to the city's requirements for listing host's operating permit numbers on their websites.

Liefeld said city officials hope the possibilities of fines will encourage companies to ensure their hosts follow guidelines. However, community members want to see more results in regulating the rental-sharing market.

"It's a far cry from what it should have been by this time," Dean Gisvold, a leader of the Irvington Community Association, said about the number permits. "Even with the passing of these ordinances, I've not seen any evidence of what the city may be doing to crack down on what's not permitted."

New Rules

Portland City Council passed an ordinance on Jan. 21 that gives the Revenue Division power to fine companies and their hosts for failing to comply with city ordinances.

Hosts are required to apply for a permit through the Department of Development Services and undergo a health and safety inspection. Companies must collect a transient lodging tax, as well as require their hosts to apply for a permit and post their permit number on their profile. Companies can be fined \$500 for every listing that does not list a permit, according to Thomas Lannom, director of the city's Revenue Division.

Lannom sent a letter last month to the several short-term rental companies operating in Portland, such as Airbnb, HomeAway and FlipKey, informing them of the new codes and what actions they needed to take to avoid fines.

Some rental companies have responded positively to the letter, saying they want to do the right thing, according to Lannom. However, he has not heard back from some companies.

That said, Lannom said he has not issued any fines yet, nor does he plan to anytime soon.

“That’s not our philosophy,” Lannom said. “We are working with companies and trying to encourage them to come into compliance in the first place.”

Citizen Concerns

Some Portlanders are concerned about the number of hosts operating without a permit. Gisvold, whose neighborhood association has dealt with several Airbnb properties, said he thinks it is unfair for short-term rental companies and hosts to not follow guidelines other hospitality business do.

“A tourist has every right to an expectation they are going to be safe and secure,” Gisvold said. “We need more regulation before an incident of a tourist in a room with a fire. Health and safety has always been my main concern.”

Kit Thompson, an Airbnb host, said she is in the process of getting her permit approved.

“It’s good the city is concerned about safety for the guests. I know about the permit process—it’s a major time drag. But you’ve got to do it, like paying taxes,” Thompson said.

Steve Unger, co-owner of The Lion and The Rose Bed and Breakfast, said the city has made a reasonable license policy for hosts that is relatively inexpensive, and most hosts for private rentals were behind the ordinances that allowed them to operate in Portland.

However, some hosts could be concerned with subjecting their home to city inspections, according to Airbnb host Lisa Myers Warmington. She signed up for a permit, but is concerned the city did not outline how intense the inspections will be.

“That’s why they’re not signing up—they’re terrified,” Warmington said. “[the city] only gave a verbal promise of ‘light inspections.’”

Complying with Ordinances

Airbnb spokesperson Christopher Nulty said the company sent a letter out to its hosts, informing them of the new requirements in Portland. Airbnb also collects the lodging tax from its hosts, according to Lannom.

“We ask all of our hosts to follow local rules and have outlined the requirements for Portland’s home-sharing regulations with our hosts on multiple occasions,” Nulty said. “We plan to continue working with the city to ensure that Portlanders can share their home while contributing to the community.”

Unger said although there is an option for hosts to list their permit number on their profile, they have the option not to fill out that field, and it will not show up if they do not.

How Portland reacts to the actions of home-sharing companies could set precedents for other places around the U.S., according to Unger.

“It be a good thing for the city to actually fine Airbnb,” Unger said. “It’s good for a city to take action, especially with other [cities] looking on. Portland is a leading edge on this.”