

The Portland Tribune

Homeless shelter stirs a mix of fear, support in Southwest neighbors

Mayor Charlie Hales calls the city's new Southwest Portland homeless shelter "an innovation." Multnomah resident Jordan Rice calls it "beta testing" in a neighborhood that isn't set up for it. The city is slated to begin shuttling homeless women to the temporary shelter at the decommissioned SFC Jerome F. Sears Army Reserve Center at 2730 S.W. Multnomah Blvd. on Thursday night for Thanksgiving dinner and a safe night's sleep.

Operated by Transition Projects Inc., the six-month, night-only shelter soon will house about 150 homeless women, and potentially their male partners on a separate floor.

The 24,810-square-foot building, acquired by the city in 2012 to be used as an emergency response center in the event of an earthquake or other disaster, is under deed restrictions that allow it to operate as a shelter for a maximum of 180 days in Portland's current housing state of emergency.

"To see a building that we own that has light, plumbing, heat and showers (sitting empty) when we have about 500 women sleeping on the street, to me is unconscionable," Hales told a packed auditorium during a community meeting Nov. 16 at the Multnomah Arts Center.

Hales spoke on a panel alongside Multnomah County Commissioner Jules Bailey, Transition Projects housing services director Stacy Borke, and City Facilities Services manager Bob Kieta. They shared information about the planned shelter and responded to neighbors' questions and comments about the facility.

Hales says that while the Sears shelter's location — outside of downtown and far from most resources and service agencies for the homeless community — isn't ideal: "We're trying to do something good — or at least good enough for now."

Many neighbors at the meeting supported the cause, but they also expressed concerns about how it would be carried out in their community.

For Rice, the shelter isn't a "not-in-my-backyard" issue; he welcomes the idea of housing homeless people in his neighborhood. But he worries that the city's push to launch a new shuttle system and open a facility with nearly twice as many beds as Transition Project's largest shelter could backfire in a poor experience for shelter guests as well as the surrounding community.

"They've never bused anyone before; they've never had this many people in one place," he says. "I can just see a recipe for a really bad scenario happening, not because anyone wasn't trying to do the right thing, but just because someone didn't think it through."

Borke, who oversees Transition Project's 310 shelter beds throughout the city, fielded neighbors' questions about the shelter's day-to-day operations, including how the shuttles would work, how women would get into the shelter and whether camping would be allowed on the grounds.

"I think that the questions are really valid," she says — and she wrote many of them down during the meeting.

Transition Projects, founded in Portland in 1969, currently has a seven-month waitlist for women hoping to stay at their shelters. Borke says she was pleased to hear that most neighbors understood "the vulnerability of women sleeping outside."

Once the shelter is established, Transition Projects will allow neighbors to volunteer at the facility. The group also is interested in working with churches, nonprofits, businesses and other organizations willing to offer their resources to women seeking shelter at the Sears site.

The city is in the process of setting up a staffed hotline for neighbors to call regarding the shelter. Hales told community members at the meeting that he would be open to having regular meetings with neighbors, to share information, collect feedback and address concerns.

Still, some neighbors weren't pleased by the information the panel speakers offered regarding the shelter. Many were surprised that the decision to convert the armory into a temporary shelter had been made quickly and with no opportunity for neighborhood process. Others wondered why another building couldn't be used as a shelter instead, such as the never-filled, 525-bed Wapato Jail that was built in North Portland in 2004.

Bailey said that while the county had investigated possible uses for the \$58.4 million jail, too many legal barriers existed to be able to use it as a shelter — though he said he didn't know the specific restrictions well enough to explain them at the meeting. The response was met with exasperated shouts of "why?" from dozens of neighbors in the audience.

The unanswered questions left Rice feeling unsettled at the meeting's end.

"I think I walked into it generally supportive of the (shelter) idea, but I actually came away a little more concerned," he said.

Southwest resident Sarah Lockhart also left the meeting disappointed — though she was more concerned about the community's response to the shelter than about the facility itself.

"I just was surprised that people were so frightened and hostile," she said.

Lockhart, a semi-retired social worker, acknowledged that some of the women who come to the shelter might struggle with mental illness or substance abuse. She even expects the shelter to encounter a logistical "glitch" or two as it gets up and running. But she says she ultimately isn't concerned.

"They're not here to hurt people — they're just trying to survive," she says of the shelter's guests. "If they have a warm, dry place to stay, they're going to be on better footing than (if they were) living outside. They're going to be able to address their problems more. They're going to be more focused on getting the help they need."

Frequently asked questions

How will the shelter operate?

Transition Projects Inc. plans to house about 150 women, and potentially their male partners, at the Sears temporary shelter.

Starting Nov. 26 and continuing for six months, guests will arrive at the shelter nightly on one of about six staffed shuttles from the downtown area, and will be guaranteed a bed if they want to return the following evening.

The shelter will open nightly at 7 p.m., and the last shuttle back to the downtown area will leave at 7 a.m. each morning.

Multnomah is "not a resource-rich community," says Stacy Borke, Transition Projects' housing services director, so she expects the shelter's guests to return downtown during the day, where they can find meals and other services.

Transition Projects maintains strict policies on substance abuse and good neighbor agreements. While guests can enter a facility with an addiction, they are not permitted to use drugs or alcohol on shelter grounds.

Transition Projects will not allow camping on the Sears center's grounds.

How much will it cost?

To prepare the building for shelter guests, the city plans to spend \$1 million on ADA upgrades, safety features, mechanical and plumbing work, and other necessary improvements. The upgrades will serve a dual purpose, as they're also part of the \$12 million plan to turn the building into an emergency response center for the west side of Portland.

The city also is planning to spend \$1.26 million on shelter operations throughout Portland — and about half of that would fund operations at the Sears shelter.

Why not use Wapato Jail as a shelter instead?

The 525-bed Wapato Jail, which has sat empty since it was built in 2004, would be ill-fitted as a shelter for many reasons, says Dave Austin, director of communications for Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury's office.

The jail is located far from resources in an industrial area of North Portland, and it's not zoned for shelter use, he says.

He estimates that the mothballed building would require at least a \$5 million investment to open as a shelter, not to mention the cost of operating the 155,000-square-foot facility. And it was built with voter-approved county and state bonds, he says, "so we have to use this building for what it was built for." Plus, he says, it's not exactly an inviting facility.

"It was built as a jail, it is not built as a shelter," he says. "People who are homeless, people who are suffering from mental health issues, families with kids — they don't need to be housed in a jail."

GoLocalPDX

Advocates Claim City-Paid Security Firm Harassing Homeless, Seizing Property

Homeless advocates in Portland told GoLocal on Monday that members of Clean and Safe Portland, a security firm paid by the City of Portland, the Portland Business Alliance and local businesses to keep homeless people from causing issues in the area, are harassing and seizing property from homeless individuals.

Ibrahim Mubarek, an activist and the organizer of Right2DreamToo, a homeless camp located in downtown Portland, told GoLocal that homeless people at the camp and across the city have been harassed by security personnel repeatedly.

"They are going around harassing people when they sweep them off the street," Mubarek said. "They are harassing them and then taking their belongings from them and putting them in storage. The problem is you can only get property out of storage if it's labeled and you have ID. These people are not labeling their stuff and a lot do not have ID, so they cannot get it back."

Mixed Messages

Mubarek also said that city officials, including Mayor Charlie Hales' Chief of Staff Josh Alpert, told organizers at the homeless camp they would not be conducting sweeps during the colder months.

"They told me they were not going to sweep people off the street in the Winter time," Mubarek said. "Josh Alpert told me that. They say you they have to clean the sidewalks and move people. Where can they go? They already found a safe space. Let them stay there."

Clean and Safe operates the "Clean and Safe District" a "a 213-block area of downtown and is one of the oldest, largest and most successful business improvement districts in the nation," according to their website.

They are contracted by the Portland Business Alliance and local business to “provide neighborhood improvement, including cleaning, security, community justice services, market research, and retail advocacy,” according to their website. They are also publicly funded by the City of Portland.

“Houseless Folks are Getting Harassed”

Mubarek said that Alpert told him that homeless people would be allowed to stay on the sidewalks overnight during the winter.

“The shelters are overcrowded,” Mubarek said. “He [Alpert] said that they would be allowed to stay on the sidewalks from 10 PM to 8 AM.”

Ptery P. Lieght, a homeless advocate, told GoLocal he plans to address the issue at the Portland City Council meeting on Wednesday. Lieght’s address to the City Council is currently scheduled as the first item on the agenda for this Wednesday, November 25.

“Clean and Safe is still harassing folks and taking their stuff,” Lieght said. “We all need to not bully our neighbors. People in housing have the same problems that people without houses do.”

“They’re Being Real Slick About It”

Mubarek also said that so far, he is frustrated with how the issue has been handled.

“What I don’t like about what they’re doing is, they’re being real slick about it,” Mubarek said. “They told us they would not do these sweeps during the winter, but now they say they need to keep things safe. They harass people and take their things. These people should not have to label their things. They should not get them taken at all.”

Lieght agreed.

“Houseless folks are getting harassed,” Lieght said. “The city is trying to address a problem without respecting the person blamed for the problem.”

Clean and Safe Response

Valerie Cunningham, a spokeswoman for Clean and Safe and director of communications for the Portland Business Alliance, did not comment on allegations of harassment. In a statement on Clean and Safe’s operations, Cunningham told GoLocal the company sometimes forces encampments to move from spaces on the sidewalk.

“Downtown Clean & Safe officers provide regular cleaning services within its every morning and if there is anything left on the streets or in other public areas that appears to be abandoned or unclaimed, the officers will remove it at the direction of the Portland Police,” Cunningham said. “Individuals camping on sidewalks or other public spaces within the district may be asked to move during business hours to facilitate the flow of pedestrian traffic and to allow downtown businesses to more easily open and operate.”