

The Oregonian

Ted Wheeler wants more shelter beds in Portland. But how?

*By Brad Schmidt
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Mayoral candidate Ted Wheeler's pledge to provide a bed for every homeless Portlander by the end of 2018 comes with a big caveat: Even he doesn't know exactly how to do it.

Wheeler on Monday said increasing shelter capacity in Portland is a "moral imperative" but acknowledged that his just-announced vision needs fine-tuning.

"I don't have all the details worked out," Wheeler told The Oregonian/OregonLive, comparing his lack of specificity to John F. Kennedy's declaration in 1961 that the United States would put men on the moon.

Wheeler last week rolled out a pledge to ensure "every person living on Portland's streets has a safe place to sleep" by the end of his second year in office, if he's elected. Yet for such a bold proclamation – the most notable of Wheeler's campaign yet – it was heavy on social-media hashtags and light on specifics.

"This has to start somewhere," Wheeler said Monday. "Here's the goal. We're going to achieve it. And if we don't, I will consider myself having failed in my desire to make real progress on what I think is the most pressing issue facing our community today."

Wheeler's top rival in the May 2016 mayoral race, Multnomah County Commissioner Jules Bailey, said meeting the goal would likely require cutting money for short-term rent assistance, affordable-housing construction or other efforts.

"You can't just come out and say, 'Hey, I'm going to wave a magic wand and I'm going to fix this,'" said Bailey, who sits on a government coalition working to reduce homelessness. "What are you going to cut from long-term solutions in favor of short-term solutions?"

Wheeler said he wants to pursue low-cost options – such as opening government-owned facilities or church space to homeless Portlanders – before considering more expensive alternatives. He also called on private, nonprofit and religious groups to do more.

"This is a communitywide problem," he said. "We all own it."

At last count, 1,887 people were unsheltered and sleeping on Multnomah County streets, according to a one-night tally from 2015. An additional 872 were sleeping in shelters.

City officials say they have 747 emergency beds available year-round and an additional 361 for the winter. That's 200 more than a year ago, mostly because the city opened its Jerome Sears facility in Southwest Portland as a women's shelter. But it's not enough.

City and county leaders are working on plans to end homelessness and create more affordable rentals, with costs projected at \$50 million a year for two decades. Mark Jolin, a county employee who is leading the "A Home For Everyone" initiative, declined Monday to discuss the estimated costs of meeting Portland's shelter needs.

"I really can't comment on the statements of political candidates," Jolin wrote in an email.

Wheeler estimated that Portland may need to add overnight capacity for 1,000 to 1,500 homeless residents, although not necessarily in traditional shelter space. Finding cheaper options could help reduce a commitment that could easily exceed \$10 million a year, he said.

"That's the expensive way," said Wheeler, currently Oregon's treasurer.

Wheeler pointed to his days volunteering at a shelter in Goose Hollow now called Portland Homeless Family Solutions. Space was used for community activities during the day but converted to shelter space at night. The operation now offers 25 beds and capacity for eight families.

"I believe there are other opportunities in the community," he said, "and we should be doing everything we can."

Wheeler recognized potential regulatory and zoning hurdles. But he said the city's recently declared housing emergency, used to temporarily open the Sears shelter, should make it easier.

He also suggested local leaders could tap into Medicaid money to help provide housing for the chronically homeless. And if all else fails, Wheeler said he would consider issuing city debt.

Wheeler said he knows some voters look at proposals from politicians with cynicism. But he said his pledge isn't audacious, it's achievable – just like Kennedy's call to reach the moon – if leaders put their minds to it.

"People stepped forward because he asked them," Wheeler said of Kennedy. "For me, this is the same kind of leadership moment."

The Portland Mercury

The Mayor's Office is Considering Creative Ways to Fix Portland's Housing Crisis

By Shelby R. King

December 18, 2015

Tenants' rights advocates concerned with a recent panel discussion they felt didn't represent those most affected by Portland's current housing crisis—the renters—on Wednesday hosted their own panel at the Community Warehouse.

Portland Tenants United and Know Your City organized a two-hour event called "Rent Crisis: A People's Perspective" and invited stakeholders to speak and answer questions. The panel included Meg Guerra from Hacienda CDC; Josh Alpert, Mayor Charlie Hales' Chief of Staff; Vahid Brown, an activist who's working closely with organizers of Portland's nearly-city-endorsed homeless camp, Hazelnut Grove; Katrina Holland from tenants' rights group the Community Alliance of Tenants; and Margot Black from activist group Portland Tenants United.

The panel discussed several topics: rent control, homeless sweep policies, no-cause lease terminations, minority discrimination by landlords, skyrocketing rents, and possible solutions for all these problems. Following an organized panel discussion, the group took questions from attendees.

I gleaned a lot of interesting information from the discussion, a lot of which came from Alpert. He said the city is currently looking at six properties at which they're considering making either temporary or permanent homeless shelters, though he didn't say where those properties were.

Alpert and Brown also briefly touched on an idea recently suggested by an unnamed developer in town that seems, well, interesting (if not yet fully fleshed out). It goes like this: Renters or homeowners who are short on cash but have an extra room to rent out would be paired with people needing housing who don't have the money to pay for it. The city would provide the money, thereby housing someone(s) while also keeping already-housed someone(s) in their homes. It's a crude idea, at best, at the moment, and clearly has a lot of bugs that would need worked out (How much money would each person get? What sort of liability issues would there be? Who would qualify?), but it shows that both residents (Yay, creative unnamed developer!) and the city are looking for creative solutions to the problem.

Alpert also says the city is in the process of creating a specific set of criteria for when and where homeless sweeps occur following a recent miscommunication. He said until the criteria are approved, the mayor gave each bureau a set of short term instructions.

"When there is bad weather here, and we all know what 'bad weather' means, do nothing," he said. "For the time being all requests [for sweeps] must come through our office."

Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, was in the audience. Dembrow recently announced he'll introduce a bill during the 2016 legislative session that would lift the statewide ban on inclusionary zoning. Alpert says the mayor is in support of lifting the ban.

"We always have lifting any preemption on any policy on the agenda for lobbying," he said. "Everyone knows we're coming for it."