

Willamette Week

Commissioner Dan Saltzman Wants a New Shelter at Portland's Terminal 1

The property in industrial Northwest Portland belongs to the Bureau of Environmental Services.

*By Beth Slovic
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Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman would like to turn a portion of vacant city property in industrial Northwest Portland into a long-term shelter for homeless men and women.

The property, Terminal 1 at 2400 NW Front Ave., served as a staging ground for the manufacturing of pipe segments during Portland's Big Pipe sewer project until 2011.

Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services still owns the 15-acre site but no longer uses it.

The city is crunching numbers to see how much it might cost to convert part of the property without tapping any money from sewer ratepayers. If the city moved forward, it would need to rezone the land from its current industrial designation.

"I'm very interested in exploring the possibility of the Housing Bureau leasing a portion of Terminal 1," says Saltzman, who manages the Housing Bureau.

He faces an immediate obstacle.

Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Bureau of Environmental Services, is having none of it. BES and the Portland Water Bureau have been under tremendous scrutiny in recent years over the spending of utility funds. Fish wants to sell the property and direct the earnings to ratepayers.

"It is a nonstarter, because it's industrial land that we intend to sell and return the profits to the ratepayers," says Fish. "Period."

The Portland Mercury

Mayor Charlie Hales Says The City Should Take Control of "Zombie Houses"

*By Dirk VanderHart
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NORBERT ZECHA adjusts his baseball cap—corduroy, resplendent with a pheasant in flight—and thinks back to the troubles across the street.

For many of his five-plus decades on SE 75th Place, the gray-and-red home facing his had been no issue. Then, in 2009, the property switched hands. Things changed.

"It's been a problem for over two or three years," says Zecha, 89, settling the pheasant cap back on his white hair.

At some point, the owner moved away, and squatters moved in. City complaint records paint a picture of engineless vehicles stranded in the home's driveway, or being taken apart in the street.

Zecha talks of "a lot of them"—seven, maybe eight people—filling the place with trash. In 2013, one of the squatters threw a wrench at a KATU reporter who'd shown up to film the "junkyard home." Nuisance fines climbed to \$85,000, but nothing happened until relatively recently, when the city cleaned house.

"I've never seen so many loads of trash," Zecha says.

No one can say exactly how many properties in Portland have sunk to the status of the now-boarded-up home at 7926 SE 75th: vacant, abandoned by owners, unclaimed by banks, and attracting problems.

They're called "zombie houses," or "vacant and distressed properties" in the parlance of city staff. Either way, they're not available for legal habitation in a white-hot housing market that's trying to add thousands of new homes as soon as possible. Now the City of Portland says it's time to reanimate the dead.

Mayor Charlie Hales' office is proposing the city dust off a foreclosure process that hasn't been used in more than four decades, snatching homes away from owners who've abandoned them. Another proposal would place zombie homes in the hands of local housing nonprofits, to be fixed up and put back into use.

"We're in a housing crisis in which we have unhoused people and people desperate to stay in the housing market," Hales said at a work session on the proposals Tuesday. "So, what a disconnect: We have houses that are zombie houses, which are an enormous blight on their neighborhoods."

The initiative is the latest housing proposal from the mayor, who earlier this year saw a more unique idea for reining in Portland's housing market, a \$25,000 demolition tax on Portland homes, fail amid widespread outcry.

This one's not so controversial—and far less novel. In recent decades, cities around the country have established formal programs to help refurbish vacant properties that have become eyesores or worse. Baltimore, San Diego, Philadelphia, and many others have programs in place. Portland, despite having tools on the books that can combat the issue, hasn't had a comprehensive effort.

There's no easy way to identify zombie homes as they sprout up. And it's often not until things get really bad that someone calls the city.

"People call us crying," Stephanie Reynolds, a crime prevention program manager with the city, told city commissioners Tuesday. "It is just unbelievably stressful to have one of these houses next door."

The Portland Police Bureau says there are 375 distressed properties in the East Precinct alone, but it's not clear they'd all fit the definition being mulled by council.

The Portland Bureau of Development Services (BDS), which enforces the city's property maintenance code, has compiled a list of 25 properties [PDF] that fit the description—most of them in Southeast Portland, none of them west of the river. They've got a total market value of

\$4.4 million, and outstanding city liens of more than \$1 million, according to figures supplied by BDS.

The city expends all manner of resources tamping down problems at these houses—between police work, code officers trying to clean them up, and neighborhood crime prevention workers dealing with neighbors.

"We are the property managers for slumlords," Hales said. "Actually worse than slumlords—slumlords actually have paying tenants."

He's adamant: It's time to take these properties away—be it from absentee owners or banks that refuse to take control of homes whose owners have defaulted on loans.

First, the mayor wants the city auditor's office to look into foreclosing on homes with outstanding liens against them, something it hasn't done in 45 years, according to Chief Deputy City Auditor Sarah Landis. Much of the reason for that lapse is that property owners snap to attention when the city starts threatening foreclosure. They'll pay their fines, but not necessarily take better care of the property, Landis says.

"If a property owner agrees to make payment on those liens," she says, "we have no more authority there."

But the auditor's office also treats foreclosures as a measure of absolute last resort, Landis says. Renewed interest from city council, which has to vote on taking control of a problem home, could end the 45-year foreclosure drought.

"There are certainly properties that we can push through the foreclosure process," Landis says, noting it's time-consuming and "a pretty drastic measure for government to take."

Even so, the process is already shifting into gear. A city committee will meet April 13 to consider foreclosure on three egregious homes.

Under the other strategy Hales is pushing, the city would petition a court to put the homes under the control of an entity—likely a housing-related nonprofit organization—that could bring it up to code. That "receiver" of the property could begin the foreclosure process if an owner doesn't pay up, but the mayor's office thinks it would more often persuade that owner to sell. Either way, homes would be fixed up.

The city has used this receivership process in the past, according to Zach Klonoski, a policy adviser in the mayor's office, but abandoned it.

"It's quite a bit of work," Klonoski says. "This is not a simple problem."

And there's interest in kick-starting the process again. Affordable housing provider Proud Ground would like to be appointed a receiver of some homes, says Executive Director Diane Linn. It's unclear if the process would lead to "affordable" options, though, Linn concedes. The revamped homes would likely be subject to the same market conditions driving up prices around town.

"Some of these are going to be in places where there's absolutely no subsidy or support that we can offer," Linn says.

Back out on SE 75th Place, 89-year-old Zecha has decided to move away after long decades. It's not the nuisance house that pushed him out, he says, but old age.

In fact, the people across the street—filthy as they were—never much bothered Zecha, he admits. Worse was when city code officers who'd been working on the "junkyard home" zeroed in on his carport.

It wasn't up to code. The city made him take it down.

"When they got done picking on the people over there," Zecha says, "they come over here."

After a Chaotic Meeting, a Big Part of Portland Police Oversight Is on Hold

By Doug Brown

April 6, 2016

THE POLICE BUREAU and an oversight group charged with keeping it in check are feuding, and it's ugly.

Earlier this week, a planned meeting of the city's Citizen Review Committee (CRC) was cancelled because of what happened the week prior: a contentious three-and-a-half-hour appeal hearing, in which a small group of activists taunted a police captain with Nazi references, and even threw a full cup of water on a committee member.

"Appeal hearings can be unpredictable," says Kristin Malone, chair of the CRC, a volunteer offshoot of the auditor's Independent Police Review (IPR). She notes, though: "The response was definitely more hectic than usual."

The decision to cancel the meeting comes days after Police Chief Larry O'Dea wrote a memo to IPR Director Constantin Severe saying he "can no longer support having my employees participating" at the meetings unless security is ramped up (and until Severe is a little nicer in his memos regarding certain cops).

Tension is nothing new at the CRC, which focuses on citizen complaints against police, but longtime watchdogs say last week's dustup—and the events that have followed—are something else.

"I've never seen anything like that at a CRC meeting," says Dan Handelman of Portland Copwatch, who has been closely following the police department for more than two decades. He adds, though, that he thinks police have been "playing the victim" in their response.

The circumstances of last Wednesday's meeting were something of a perfect storm: A passionate group of police activists convened in the Portland Building to hear the appeal of one of their own, police-filming activist Robert Lee West.

West filed a complaint last year after an officer got out of his car and grabbed West's camera as he was legally filming police downtown. The city's Police Review Board tossed the complaint, finding there wasn't enough evidence to rule against the officer, Scott Groshong.

But Severe, in a February 1 memo, called for an expedited appeal and railed against Groshong's boss—somewhat notorious Captain Mark Kruger—for acting "akin to a defense counsel... as opposed to a neutral fact-finder." He also criticized Kruger's "hostile and combative" behavior in front of the Police Review Board and his "disrespect" toward the police bureau's internal affairs unit and IPR.

It all made for quite a scene.

At the meeting, activists faced off from their seats—and sometimes the stage—against Kruger, there to defend Groshong. They repeatedly called the captain a "Nazi," referencing a Nazi memorial he'd once infamously set up in a public park.

Malone tells the Mercury she was told not to kick anyone out of the meeting "unless you want to become a defendant in a lawsuit." She now believes that direction was wrong, and learned she had the authority to do so.

The CRC convened that night to determine whether the ruling on West's complaint was reasonable. Was grabbing the camera unprofessional?

Kruger and Commander George Burke said they couldn't really tell if the camera was grabbed or if Groshong merely put his hand in front of the lens, despite a publicly available video clearly showing it was the former.

"There is no evidence in this video that the officer grabbed the camera at any time," Kruger told the CRC, to more jeers from the crowd.

The CRC majority ultimately sided with West, voting 5-2 against the PRB's finding ("There was no way Captain Kruger could have viewed the same video I viewed," Malone explained in the meeting.) It's now up to O'Dea to accept the CRC's disciplinary recommendations or attend a conference hearing with the group. The matter will go to the Portland City Council if they can't work out their differences.

The general upheaval of the meeting culminated after the vote, when activist Charles Johnson walked onstage and threw a cup of water on James Young, one of two CRC members to side with the police. Johnson was escorted out by a security guard.