

## The Oregonian

# Multnomah County offers incentives for homeowners to house homeless in backyards

*By Molly Harbarger*

*March 16, 2017*

With more than \$300,000 and volunteer homeowners, Multnomah County has a new idea to fight homelessness: Build tiny houses in people's backyards and rent them out to families with children now living on the street.

The homeowners would pay nothing for the construction. They would become landlords and maintain the units for homeless families for five years.

Then the tiny houses would become theirs to do with what they want. If the homeowners break the contract before then, they pay the cost of construction.

The project would put the 8-month-old joint homeless office - a shared effort between the county and Portland -- in the housing business while offering an innovative, if so far small-scale, way to chip away at Portland's affordable housing shortage.

Four tiny houses are tentatively scheduled to launch this June at \$75,000 apiece, with the hope for up to 300 accessory dwelling units as they're known in the next year if the first ones work out.

The Multnomah County Idea Lab, a 2-year-old office focused on using out-of-the-box thinking to create public policy, combined tactics of the Federal Emergency Management Agency with a county weatherization program to come up with the plan.

The tiny houses would help fill the need for low-income housing before the recently passed Portland housing bond and private developers can build the 24,000 units that studies say the city needs to stem its housing crisis.

"Those units are not going to come on line for another two to three years and they're really expensive to build in some cases," said lab director Mary Li. "We have people on the street now."

Supporters hope to be able to reduce the cost per house if the project expands, but the price tag is still cheaper than government-funded shelter beds per year. A family of four costs \$32,000 a year to house and help in a shelter.

That same family could be supported in one of the pilot project's tiny houses for \$15,000 a year during the five-year contract.

Once in the tiny houses, the families will plug into existing county services, including a mobile team that helps people stay in their homes after experiencing homelessness. That includes resolving disputes with landlords, helping manage unexpected expenses and job help.

Meyer Memorial Trust and the joint city-county homeless office are contributing \$175,000 each to the pilot program.

If the county decides to expand the project, Li and her team would return to city and county officials to ask for more money.

So far, the idea has Mayor Ted Wheeler's support, as well as the county's.

"When I talk to Portlanders, they often ask me what they can do to help address the homelessness situation. Most want to volunteer time or donate resources, but some really want to do more," Wheeler said. "This pilot is a great way to test whether partnerships between homeowners, government and those experiencing homelessness can work."

Wheeler is under pressure to produce results to help homeless people after campaigning on that platform. He also wants to move away from allowing people to live on the streets or in tents.

City and county officials also supported an alternative shelter idea that relies on the [tiny house model in the Kenton neighborhood, where 14 "sleeping pods" are going](#) -- just big enough for a homeless person to sleep in and store belongings. The Kenton project will be for women and last a year, when advocates and officials will figure out whether to expand it.

In that case, the city wanted neighborhood buy-in and won approval from the Kenton Neighborhood Association. But in this case, Portland already has a rental accessory dwelling unit policy.

The neighborhood association voted 178 to 75 in favor of a village of 14 tiny houses for homeless women. It is the first one initiated by the city.

"This is really just rental housing as any rental housing would be," said joint office director Marc Jolin. "It's a family that is going to be renting, so I don't expect this will be a situation that would cause significant concern for neighborhoods."

Jolin said the joint office has heard the community calling for government to get smarter and more creative on how to deal with the homeless population. This project shares that burden with the private and nonprofit sector.

Jolin expects most of the families will want to move on quickly from the tiny houses, which would be about 200 square feet, with bunkbeds for the kids and water, sanitation and plumbing. If they move out before the five-year contract is up, a new family will move in.

But there's no time limit how long they can stay. Once the units revert to a landlord's ownership, homeless service providers will find a new place for families if the owners choose not to rent to them anymore.

Willamette Week first reported plans for the experiment earlier this week.

The Idea Lab acknowledges that the details are in flux now, with more to figure out, such as how the family will be expected to contribute to the costs of living there and possible tax abatements for the landlords.

But Li said the venture is part of coming at the problem from a different perspective than how government usually works -- a necessity, she said, considering that the homeless crisis is only worsening.

Multnomah County surveyed nearly 4,000 people without permanent housing in 2015, and advocates and officials expect that number to be the same, if not more, when the results of 2017's homeless count arrive in the next months.

"I don't think anyone of us feels like we can rest on our laurels," Li said. "It has not ended and we can do more. Everyone can do more."

## The Portland Mercury

### The City Will Ask a Skeptical Judge to Agree with Its New Meeting Exclusion Policy

*By Dirk VanderHart  
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In coming weeks, the city plans to file a motion before US District Judge Michael Simon asking him to enshrine a [controversial ordinance](#) that allows people to be banned from City Council meetings for months.

That could be a tough sell. After all, Simon is the judge who in 2015 [lambasted the city's practice](#) of excluding disruptive meeting attendees for a month or more, saying it was a violation of constitutional rights to ban "prospective" disruption.

Which might be what Mayor Ted Wheeler is counting on. If Simon says the city's new ordinance is still unconstitutional, the city plans to appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

"That's then a lengthy legal process," Michael Cox, Wheeler's chief spokesperson, said this morning.

The upshot: It's unlikely Portland's increasingly hectic City Council meetings will see an exclusion for some time. Rather, Wheeler's people say the mayor will likely start ejecting people who disrupt proceedings—a process which under Hales frequently led to council chambers being cleared, and sometimes involved arrest.

News of the city's plan to file a motion before Simon is the first glimpse we've had of officials' plans for moving the law forward. [It passed yesterday unanimously](#). Wheeler conceded at the time that his proposal might not be constitutional, and said the city would get a federal court to weigh in before enforcement could begin.

That left opponents at the ACLU of Oregon scratching their heads. They didn't see a way for the city to get a court's opinion without enforcing the law, and so inciting a courting challenge. But Wheeler's folks say that's not necessary.

Cox and the mayor's deputy chief of staff, Kristin Dennis, believe the city's under an ongoing injunction not to exclude people, following Simon's December 2015 ruling in the case of Joe Walsh, who sued after Hales excluded him for disruption.

"We're asking the court to set aside the permanent injunction which is now in place," Cox says. "There's no other way to get around the injunction and we don't want to be in contempt of court."

The city will file the motion at some point after the law goes into effect in 29 days, he says.

Dennis tells the Mercury she thinks there's a chance Simon will validate the city's ordinance, though he came out strongly against the old exclusion policy. The new ordinance largely mirrors that policy, but better codifies how a person can be ejected or excluded, and sets a ceiling of 60 days on exclusions.

"I think he left the door open for us to come back with a more narrowly tailored ordinance," Dennis says.

The ACLU, meanwhile has repeatedly said the city's ordinance flies in the face of Simon's earlier ruling.