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Portland Mayor Sued for Records on Foster-Powell Homeless Shelter

*By Gordon R. Friedman
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Tyler Bechtel, a Portland man who lives close to the site of a planned Foster-Powell-area homeless shelter, has filed suit against the city and Mayor Ted Wheeler, claiming the mayor's office has improperly kept secret records about the project.

Amid growing tensions over Portland's homelessness crisis, the plan to open a shelter at Foster and Southeast 61st Avenue has been a flashpoint for some residents. Critics say the idea to bed more than 100 homeless people at the site of a closed-down grocery store is ill advised because it would be too close to a school and too far from the offices of social services agencies, and may pose a public safety problem.

Bechtel is one of the detractors and has banded together with other east Portland residents as an organization called Southeast Allied Communities, which bills itself as opposed to the Foster shelter.

"We believe that a shelter might be the right idea but not in this location," said Bechtel, who works as an Oregon State Police detective and lives in the Creston-Kenilworth neighborhood.

Wheeler and Deborah Kafoury, chairwoman of the Multnomah County Commission, have spoken publicly about their support for the shelter.

Bechtel filed a public records request for city and county emails related to the shelter plan after county commissioners approved it in January. Wheeler's office acknowledged it had some records, according to Bechtel's suit. But a city paralegal withheld an email and attachment, saying state law allows it to keep the records secret because they contain exempt financial and personal information and because the records contain "internal advisory communications," records show.

Bechtel claims in court filings the city erred on procedural grounds because it should have released to him copies of the requested records with confidential portions blacked-out. The city disagreed in its own filings. Wheeler's office declined to comment.

Bechtel said he believes the withheld email and document may shed light on officials' decision to site the shelter at 6144 Southeast Foster Road, possibly by revealing a list of other locations officials considered. He testified last year to the Multnomah County Commission that people living near the proposed shelter site have not had their concerns allayed by local officials, and asked commissioners to delay approval of the shelter lease. They approved it 4-1.