

Portland will debate homeless shelter site as decision nears

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By Randy Billings Staff Writer

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One site is on the outskirts of town – an undeveloped field in an industrial area near the Westbrook line in Portland’s Riverton neighborhood. The other is a gravel parking lot located near the working waterfront on Commercial Street, a busy thoroughfare in and out of downtown.

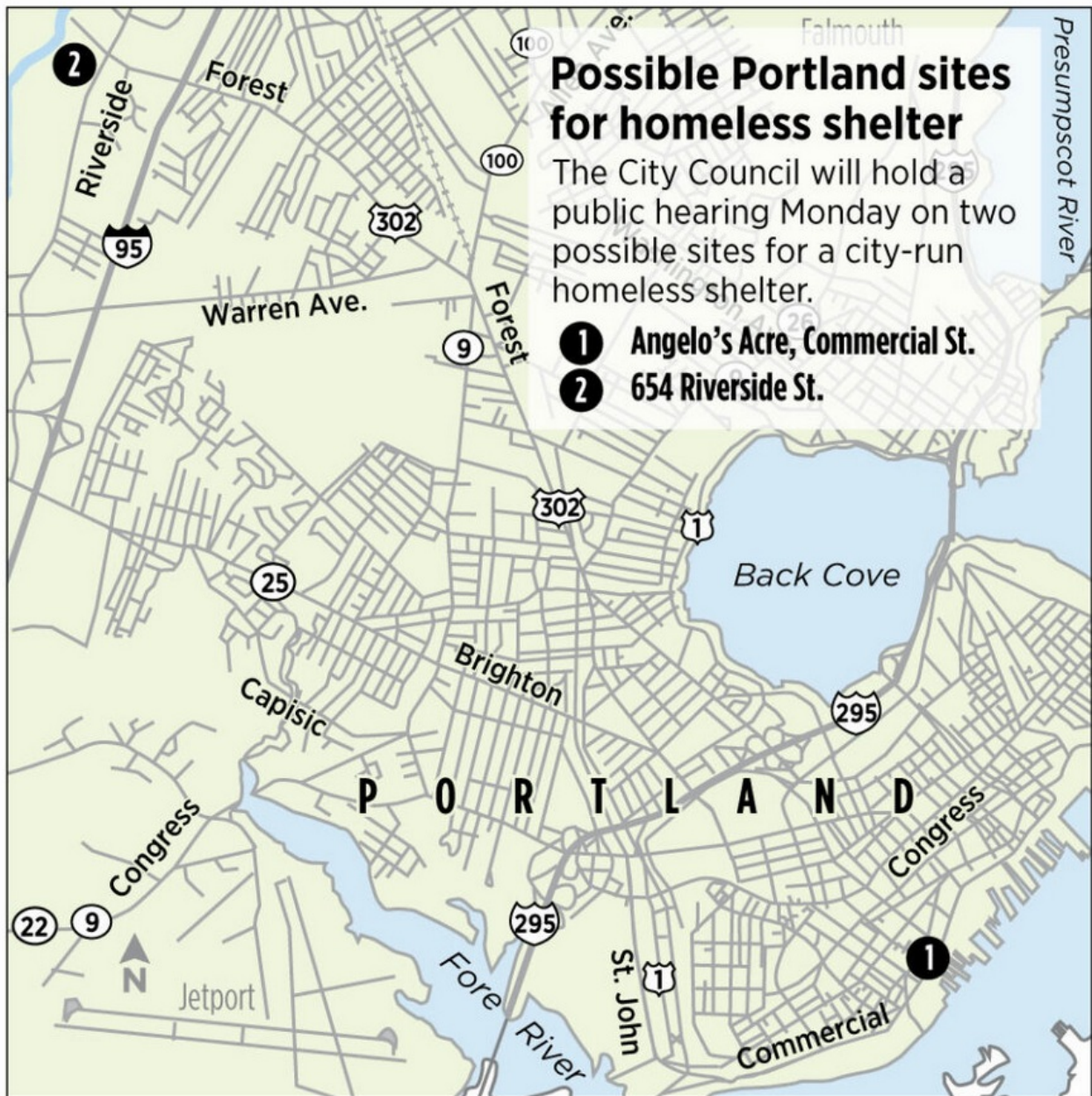
They are the last two sites standing after a year-long debate in Maine’s largest city about where to locate a new homeless shelter, a modern facility envisioned as a safer and more humane space for both city staff and those in need.

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The City Council will hold a public hearing Monday about whether a new homeless shelter should be built at 654 Riverside St. or Angelo’s Acre, at the corner of Commercial and Park streets.

Or none of the above. Both sites have already drawn significant criticism, whether from neighbors, service providers or people who’ve experienced homelessness.



SOURCE: City of Portland

STAFF GRAPHIC | MICHAEL FISHER

Mayor Ethan Strimling said the council is expected to postpone a final vote to June 3 and individual councilors may offer amendments to force votes on other sites. While some councilors say they are confident a site will be chosen, Strimling said he does not believe that either site has a majority of councilors supporting it yet.

"I will not support a 150-bed shelter at either site, but Riverton is the absolute worst possible option," Strimling said. "It is the epitome of hiding our homeless and putting the interests of developers ahead of our most vulnerable."

The council's Health and Human Services Committee, led by Councilor Belinda Ray, has spent the last year looking for possible shelter locations after the council rejected a staff recommendation to build a 200-bed shelter at the city-owned Barron Center.

The committee culled an inventory of city-owned and privately held properties down to 15 potential locations. After additional research, it winnowed it down to three. The committee removed a potential site next to the Cumberland County Jail from consideration, because of concerns about pedestrian safety and concentrating too many social services in the Libbytown-St. Johns Valley neighborhoods.

NEW SHELTER PROPOSAL

In recent years, city officials have been looking to replace the Oxford Street Shelter, which has been in Bayside for over 30 years. The converted three-story apartment building and auto garage can hold 154 people sleeping on floor mats. An additional 75 mats are set up at Preble Street to accommodate overflow and several times a month the General Assistance office is used as a second overflow.

City Manager Jon Jennings has said that the current facility is not safe for staff or the people who stay there.

The city is looking to create a new shelter with space for services that are not provided at the current shelter. For example, the new shelter would have 150 beds, rather than floor mats, with space to accommodate overflow. It would have a soup kitchen, medical clinic, rooms for private counseling, an enclosed courtyard and a community policing station, which the current shelter lacks, city officials have said.

In addition to public transportation, the city says it will also use a van to help people make it to appointments.

The city is also working with Avesta Housing and Opportunity Alliance to create specialty facilities for seniors over the age of 55 and those struggling with mental illness, respectively. Jennings said the city is also working with Community Housing of Maine, which is looking to build 50-60 affordable housing units at two city-owned sites.

Preble Street is also looking to create a women's shelter for victims of abuse and human trafficking.

MODEL QUESTIONED

As councilors have worked their way through proposed locations, opponents have quickly organized. Whether it's Nason's Corner, Libbytown-St. Johns Valley or Riverton, opponents argue, no neighborhood should host a so-called "mega-shelter."

They say that several smaller shelters scattered throughout the city would be better, even though city officials and social service providers say such a model would be more expensive and more difficult manage.

Homeless advocates, including Preble Street, have pushed back on the use of the term “mega-shelter,” describing it as a scare tactic. Preble Street’s Heather Zimmerman noted that the proposed shelter is actually smaller than the existing shelter.

Strimling supports creating several smaller shelters in several different neighborhoods. This week, he said the city should keep the Oxford Street Shelter, but use 75 beds, instead of mats. It could then build or retrofit existing buildings into either two 75-bed shelters, or three 50-bed shelters.

“(It’s) better for the homeless and (has) less impact on neighborhoods,” Strimling said.

But councilors have already endorsed a single-site model. There appears to be little research to support a scattered-site shelter model and most local service providers support the city’s plan to create one shelter rather than several smaller ones.

Bob Fowler, executive director of Milestone Foundation, participated in a task force several years ago that looked into whether a scattered-site shelter model would be better than a single site. He said he supported a scattered-site model heading into that study and did not expect to change his mind.

“My thinking has evolved as I have gotten to understand more the challenges and opportunities and all the variables related to that particular debate,” Fowler said. “I think that an appropriately designed and operated single site is, on balance, the preferable approach.”

While scattered-site proponents contend their approach mirrors a national trend and best practice, there appears to be little research to support that claim, according to Nan Roman, the president and CEO of the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a nonprofit advocacy group.

“I am not aware of any research out there that smaller shelters are better than bigger shelters,” Roman said.

Roman said that many shelters in the U.S. have over 200 beds and decisions about shelter size typically boil down to what a community wants and is able to pay for.

Dan D’Ippolito, Preble Street’s community engagement director, said in an email that he supports the concept of scattered sites, but “the economics of that model are extremely challenging.” He is concerned about the Riverside location and 150-person capacity of the

new shelter, especially since up to 250 adults have been seeking emergency shelter on certain nights recently.

“Preble Street is opposed to the proposed Riverside location. It is the only location floated so far that we have opposed,” he said. “In terms of capacity at the proposed shelter, we feel strongly that if the City is making an investment of this magnitude, they have a responsibility to do it right and meet the full need.”

RIVERSIDE

On a recent afternoon, several Riverton residents stood in the 7 acre field off at 654 Riverside St. and wondered why city leaders would ever want to build a homeless shelter there.

“My No. 1 concern is the safety of the children in this neighborhood,” said Caroline Wagner.

Ashley Souther, who lives about a mile from the proposed site, is among residents who feel as though the council has made up its mind to locate the shelter on Riverside Street, because it’s a low-income neighborhood that isn’t that politically active.

“I think they saw this site as having the least opposition,” Souther said.

But that has changed in recent weeks. Over two dozen residents have been showing up to each City Council meeting to express opposition to the proposal. They argue that the site is too far from downtown, where most social services are located. And the area lacks sidewalks and lighting, they say.

They worry about impact the shelter may have on public safety. They’re worried about shelter guests riding on the same public buses as high school students and wandering around the neighborhood. They’re worried about the safety of shelter guests, who may wander into a nearby river and drown or overdose in the woods.

John McGovern, who has lived in Riverton his whole life, said he’s not concerned about the people who are homeless for short periods of time, but rather those who prey on the homeless and choose not to use shelter services.

“I’m just afraid that someone is going to get hurt or worse,” McGovern said.

ANGELO’S ACRE

The other location before the council is Angelo’s Acre, a gravel parking lot on Commercial Street, near the Casco Bay Bridge. But city staff has begun discussing how that land could help address parking issues for people who work on the waterfront.

Some councilors have expressed concerns about that location though. City planners said a shelter at that site would need to be two-stories, instead of one, and would have to be built right next to the sidewalk. And some councilors worry about that – and the proximity to the working waterfront – could be dangerous for shelter guests.

At a recent council meeting, West End resident Lydia Wagner worried that a shelter there would lead to more problems at Harborview Park and the nearby playground. She said it would “radically transform our community.”

Chris Weiner, a commercial fisherman who owns a condo on Park Street, also spoke against the proposed location. “Angelo’s Acre has to be one of the worst choices we could have come up with,” he said.

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