

Referendum won't impact homeless center plan, Portland officials say

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By Michael Kelley

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A city committee has recommended pursuing Developers Collaborative's proposal for a homeless services center in Portland. Early designs call for a cafeteria, medical clinics and sleeping space for 200, as well as a walking path, raised garden beds, outdoor sleeping spaces, a stage and a reading area.

Contributed / Developers Collaborative

An effort underway to limit the size of new homeless shelters in Portland to 50 beds will not hinder the city's plans for a 200-bed homeless services center on Riverside Street, city officials say.

"The committee continues to move this item forward without delay or hindrance. We are going to move it forward in our normal process," Councilor Spencer Thibodeau, chairperson of the housing and economic development committee, said last week.

"This has been and continues to be a priority for this committee and will continue to be," Thibodeau said.

The committee May 18 recommended that the city further negotiate land and lease agreements with Developers Collaborative to



Developers Collaborative envisions a large entry space connecting to a 200-seat cafeteria, 7,000 square feet of office and clinic space and sleeping areas for 144 men and 60 women.

Contributed / Developers Collaborative

design and build the facility, which will replace the 30-year-old Oxford Street Shelter.

A group, Portland for Smaller Shelters, hopes to change Portland's zoning standards to ensure new homeless shelters are open 24 hours a day and have no more than 50 beds. If petitioners collect 1,500 certifiable signatures by July 11, the measure will be placed on the November ballot.

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Although he supports the Developers Collaborative plan, Councilor Pious Ali, a member of the housing and economic development committee, said he is worried about how the citizen referendum could impact the proposal.

City Economic Development Director Greg Mitchell said it is still unknown if the referendum will be on the November ballot, and if it is, whether it would pass.

Stephanie Neuts, a Riverton resident and one of the Portland for Smaller Shelters leaders, said Monday the group is collecting signatures through June 7.

"At that point, we hope to officially count our sheets and have a better idea on where we stand, get the sheets we have notarized and know where we are at moving forward," she said.

The goal, Mitchell said, is to have the project approved before the referendum, if voters approve it, goes into effect. If the referendum passes, it would take effect 30 days later, so if the project receives final approval from the planning board 45 days before that date, it would be able to move forward, according to Michael Goldman, associate corporation counsel for the city,

To meet that timeline, the committee must deliver a negotiated deal with Developers Collaborative to the City Council within the next 45 days, wrap up design work this summer and have the proposal to the planning board for site plan review by fall, Mitchell said. Construction could begin in late 2021 and wrap up by the end of 2023.

The schedule Developers Collaborative proposes is more expedited, with site work beginning in December and construction starting in February 2022 and wrapping up in June 2022. Interior work would take place between March and November 2022, with landscaping in summer 2022, all with the goal of having the city occupy it before the winter of 2022-2023.

The Developers Collaborative proposal was one of three the city received in response to its requests for proposals.

Mitchell said only two of the proposals, from Developers Collaborative and from FD Stonewater were considered because the third, from Fuego LLC, “was a different concept not in line with the (request for proposals) requirements.” The Fuego Blue proposal suggested the town forgo building a homeless services center in favor of more permanent transitional housing.

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Mitchell said although both the Developers Collaborative and Stonewater visions were “very solid and well-rounded proposals,” and Stonewater has designed previous homeless shelters, Developers Collaborative scored higher due to experience on local projects and creative design of the proposed homeless services center.

“I think what is really, truly needed here is experience in the community having public discussions and deliberations and this particular development team has done that previously,” Thibodeau said.

Joey Brunelle, a resident of Kellogg Street, didn’t speak against the recommendation of negotiating further with Developers Collaborative, but was concerned that the development team put together, which includes representatives of Developers Collective, Cianbro, Winston Scott Architects, Gorrill Palmer Consulting Engineers, Aceto Landscaping Architecture, Thornton Tomasetti and Amistad, is comprised of all men.

“I am wondering if some gender diversity on the planning team might be important,” he said.

Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, called the design a “gamechanger for the homeless in Portland.”

“This seems to be an excellent proposal,” he said. “I am just thrilled the city is moving forward to create a service center for solving homelessness. I hope that doesn’t get derailed.”

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