

# Portland city councilors affirm support for 200-bed shelter, with referendum looming

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By Randy Billings

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The Portland City Council voted 6-3 to enter into a second agreement with a developer to build a 200-bed homeless shelter and service center in the Riverton neighborhood, even as residents seek a November referendum to block the project.

The agreement commits the city to paying a \$250,000 fee to the Developers Collaborative, as they continue to investigate whether a city parcel on Riverside Street can be developed into a new homeless services center and get approvals for the \$19 million project.

The council vote came after members of the public urged councilors to delay the vote until after voters weigh in on a city initiative that would, among other things, limit the size of new shelters in Portland to 50 beds. The referendum is aimed at derailing the city's shelter plan. But the city's plan could still move forward, as long as the shelter receives approvals at least 45 days before the election.

The council will hold a workshop on Monday to discuss the citizens initiative and consider whether it would like to offer a competing proposal. The council voted to postpone setting an election date for the citizens referendum, proposed by Smaller Shelters for Portland, until their Aug. 23 meeting. That would still allow the council to place the question on the November ballot, the city clerk said.

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City Manager Jon Jennings said Developers Collaborative already has filed plans for the homeless services center with the city. A remote neighborhood meeting has been scheduled for July 26 and a planning board workshop is slated the following day.

Jennings said the agreement was the next step on a "focused path forward" toward replacing the city-run Oxford Street Shelter for adults, an effort that has been discussed over the last five to 10 years.

"All of that stuff would be significantly delayed," Jennings said, when asked about the impact of delaying the vote, even for a month. I see this as the nexus of everything we have done before coming to a head."

During a 70-minute public hearing, speakers urged the council by a nearly 3-to-1 margin to delay a vote on the agreement until after voters weigh in on a citizen referendum in November to limit the size of new homeless shelters to 50 beds. Some questioned whether the city should spend \$250,000 on a proposal that it may not be able to build, should the referendum pass. And others alluded to attacks on democracy across the country in a bid to sway the council.

But many repeated previous concerns that the shelter was simply too big and too far from services downtown.

“The people of Portland deserve to be heard on this,” Congress Street resident Justin Beth said.

While opponents accused the council of not listening to people who have experienced homelessness and rushing the proposal forward ahead of the referendum, city officials noted that it has spent several years planning for the new shelter. Several nonprofits that serve people experiencing homelessness, including Spurwink, Amistad and Shalom House, all endorsed the city’s efforts to move ahead with the proposal.

Preble Street, the city’s leading nonprofit homeless services provider, did not testify on the proposal.

Brian Townsend, executive director of Amistad, which serves people with mental illness and is a project consultant with the Developers Collaborative, said his group has been surveying its clients and providing feedback on design to the developers. None has expressed concerns about the size or location of the services center.

“A lot of folks we talk to feel some level of comfort if the space is adequately designed around a lot of people,” he said. “There’s more safety in it. It’s almost a moot point on the topic.”

City Councilor Belinda Ray pushed back against accusations that the city was not focused on housing and diversion. She noted that the city has been using a Housing First approach to homelessness since 2013 and its program has won awards. She noted that city staff housed 416 people experiencing homelessness last year, with a 97 percent success rate.

City Councilor Mark Dion proposed postponing the vote on the agreement until next month to allow the council time to have a workshop on the referendum and possibly adjust the size of the proposed shelter to capacity that could get neighborhood support. But his motion failed, with Councilors Pious Ali, April Fournier and Andrew Zarro in support.

Dion went on to support the agreement after his proposal failed.

Portland has been working on plans to replace the Oxford Street Shelter for about five years. City staff first recommended building the shelter at the Barron Center, a city-run nursing home, but neighborhood opposition sent them back to the drawing board. Councilors ultimately selected a piece of city-owned land on Riverside Street.

The city now leases 203 Oxford St. as a shelter for single adults. But officials say the building – a converted three-story apartment building and auto garage – is outdated and unsafe for the clients and staff.

The new homeless services center proposed for 654 Riverside St. would offer services and amenities not available on Oxford Street, but it would be located near the Westbrook line, far from services downtown.

The new shelter would offer about 200 beds, whereas Oxford Street can only accommodate 154 people on thin floor mats. The new shelter would also have an onsite health clinic, rooms for community service providers to meet with and provide services to clients, soup kitchen, indoor lockers and restrooms, services that are not available at the current location. And the new design would allow for social distancing, which was needed during the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the city halved the capacity at Oxford Street and has housed many homeless individuals and families on hotel rooms, using state funding.

As of July 7, Oxford Street was averaging 49 people a night and another 120 people on average in hotels during the previous month. The city had an average of 31 families, totaling 95 people, in its family shelter on Chestnut Street, plus another 66 families, totaling 199 individuals, in hotels on average.

The Developers Collaborative's proposal is estimated to cost \$19.23 million and would include a bus shelter on Riverside Street, a raised garden and benches, as well as a grassy courtyard with a stage and reading tree. The proposal also includes several other suggestions, among them a possible outdoor sleeping pavilion, and identifies a portion of the property where a future transitional housing project could be built.

The city also would offer a shuttle service for clients who need to go downtown for appointments.

Cullen Ryan, executive director of the Community Housing of Maine who used to oversee the Oxford Street Shelter, said the city's model is the right one for Portland.

"I believe you should move forward," Ryan said. "We tried the approach of having things in various locations in the city and sending people through a maze to find those things and it doesn't work well. I think this approach will."