

Portland council expected to support single shelter to replace Oxford Street facility

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By Randy Billings

November 15, 2018



The Portland City Council is expected to vote Monday on a resolution that would formally direct city staff to come up with a plan for a large new city-run homeless shelter while working with nonprofits on other shelters to serve groups with special needs.

The upcoming vote comes after a contentious meeting Tuesday of the council's Health and Human Services and Public Safety Committee, which was attended by the full council. It was clear that committee members were split between favoring the single city-run shelter or several smaller shelters scattered throughout Portland. Most councilors said they were more likely to support a single city-run shelter.

At one point, City Councilor Belinda Ray, who leads the committee, asked for an informal straw poll to make clear that six councilors were favoring a single city shelter. Several social service providers have said in emails to Ray that they agree a larger, consolidated shelter would.

Mayor Ethan Strimling and City Councilor Brian Batson are pushing for multiple city shelters.

Batson, who serves on the committee, said he will work on his own proposal to build two city-run shelters: a service-rich facility off-peninsula and another on the peninsula that could rely

on external community services. He hopes to introduce the proposal to the committee before it presents formal recommendations for a shelter design and location to the full council, which may not happen until early next year.

“I think we could easily keep the option open for two,” said Batson, whose district includes land next to the city-owned Barron Center that was previously recommended by city staff for a 200-bed shelter, soup kitchen, health clinic and support services.

DEBATE LIKELY TO CONTINUE IN 2019

The argument about which service model to pursue is the latest twist in a long and complicated conversation that will likely dominate the council agenda for 2019 as it tries to replace the Oxford Street Shelter, an outdated and overcrowded facility that has operated in Bayside for more than 30 years. The aging converted apartment building can shelter 154 adults on floor mats, but routinely sends people to overflow shelters.

Councilors expressed support Tuesday for a new staff proposal to build one consolidated city shelter while also working with two nonprofits, Avesta Housing and Opportunity Alliance, to create specialized facilities for adults 55 and older who need assisted living and for the mentally ill. Staff believes the nonprofit partnerships would allow the city to focus on a 150-bed emergency adult shelter with additional services such as meals and health care.

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But Batson raised the possibility of an additional partnership that could serve some of the city’s homeless population and reduce the need for a large shelter. Batson said officials at Preble Street told him the nonprofit was not aware that the city was seeking partners, but that it is willing to help, preferably with a shelter for women.

Jennings said Wednesday that acting Preble Street Executive Director Donna Yellen spoke to him about opening a 40- to 50-person women-only shelter, but they didn’t discuss what the nonprofit would need from the city.

Ray said Tuesday she doesn’t believe the city’s planning for its own shelter should be contingent on Preble Street. In addition to recently reducing hours at its day shelter for financial reasons, Ray said, the nonprofit already finances three supportive housing developments for chronically homeless people and has been talking about opening a women’s shelter since at least 2015.

“I have a really hard time basing our plans on their plans,” Ray said. “Should another organization wish to come forward and establish something, they certainly can. We’re not precluding anyone else from coming and saying, ‘We want to operate a shelter of this sort.’ That would be wonderful.”

Yellen did not respond to requests for an interview, but said in a statement Wednesday that “we welcome the opportunity to be of help to the city and their process in creating a new homeless service delivery center.”

A COMMITTEE DIVIDED

Councilors grew frustrated at the end of the nearly four-hour meeting Tuesday. The three-member committee was split on how to proceed, with Ray advocating for a single city shelter, and Batson looking for two city shelters. The third member, Councilor Pious Ali, was inclined to give Batson more time to explore a two-shelter model.

But with the entire council attending, Ray’s straw poll showed six councilors in support of exploring a single city shelter. Councilor Justin Costa was undecided. Councilor Kim Cook said Wednesday she is working on a resolution to introduce at Monday’s council meeting formally directing staff to explore locations and other aspects associated with a single shelter. But Batson suggested that would circumvent the committee’s jurisdiction.

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“I feel the committee process was not respected,” Batson said Wednesday. “Not only have I yet to see a legitimate example of this model working in a smaller city, I feel the very obvious impacts.”

Ray, on the other hand, said she hopes the consensus will finally move the conversation forward, after years of delays. She said the council has consistently supported a single-shelter model over scattered-site models over the years and on Tuesday read excerpts of letters from social service providers, including Milestone Foundation, Shalom House, Through These Doors, Greater Portland Health and Community Housing of Maine, who believe a consolidated shelter would be better for clients and a more efficient use of limited resources.

“I don’t want to have this conversation again next year,” Ray said Tuesday. “I want to make sure that we all know what we’re saying here tonight so we don’t come into 2019 and say, ‘Hey, I want to explore scattered sites.’ ”

Over the summer, staff proposed a new 200-bed shelter with an on-site soup kitchen and health clinic next to the city-owned Barron Center near the Westbrook line, which drew fierce opposition from the Nason’s Corner neighborhood. The committee loosened previous restrictions on potential sites, opening up all areas of the city to a potential shelter site.

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City staff have mapped over 30 potential sites for one or more new shelters. But they are not conducting a thorough analysis or releasing specific addresses to the public until they receive additional guidance from the council.

A District Road site near the Portland International Jetport that was suggested by Nason's Corner residents appears to be on the map, as are a parking area near the Casco Bay Bridge, the Portland Ocean Terminal to the Amethyst lot on the eastern waterfront, Dougherty Field in Libbytown, the Portland Technology Park and land near the city's public works campus on Canco Road.

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