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To
Portland City Council

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Communication: Unhoused Policy development

Dear council members,

Firstly, I am genuinely grateful that the incoming mayor's approach, while it is not contradictory to the idea of housing people, it does not prioritize the housing first approach – a policy which the *National Coalition to end Homelessness* has essentially been bribing agencies to adopt for decades now. *Homelessness* is a *family* issue, not a private housing issue. From its inception thousands of years ago, the private home was, and it remains, a tool to serve the needs of the nuclear family. Attempting to shove people who come from broken families into small and isolated boxes and expecting they'll magically find the motivation to maintain it utterly misses the heart of the issue. It is when people lack family that they lose motivation to perform labor in a labor market and culture which have been built around the organizing principles of the nuclear family and the private home. This is because such individuals have in part reverted back to the idea of an extended family – a tribe, or in this case a 'street family'. Drugs become a means for affiliation and human connection if not coping for the broken ties, not an ends in the themselves.

This is, in a nutshell, my take on the issue anyway. Over the years I've lived outside for a total of between 5-6 years in Oregon and a number of other states. And I've done a lot of reading on the issue as well [see [my essays](#)].

On the other hand, mayor Wilson seems to have come in with the philosophy that 'build it and they will come'. Anywhere west of the cascades is the land of the free-birds where land is plenty and climate is accommodating. I think you all will find people living outside will not simply tuck their tail between their legs and do as they are told just because someone built a shelter for them. What so often goes unsaid in these conversations are key phrases such as 'quality standards' and 'tenant rights'.

What began my advocacy almost ten years ago, for example, was the notion of putting large-scale communal housing on the free rental market. I told myself that people are homeless, not helpless, and they need options more than they need help. Yet our options so often seem to be boiled down to those of extremes; pay an arm and a leg for overpriced isolation or being treated like an animal in a shelter or chased around like a rat outside. Shelters as they currently are conceived either lack an equal proportion of day-room to dorm space, and they simply do not allow people access during the day to what space they do have. When people do check in or go there for a meal, they have to stand in line out in the cold for an hour. Employees pull power trips. A subtle point which is difficult for outsider observers to grasp the importance of is that boundaries are not *permeable* in the sense that people – random strangers – cannot come and go from a place as they please anymore. This used to create such a welcoming, free, and loving vibe in Oregon. Its one of those things which once made this place special.

The shelter in Eugene is a good example; it once had what was among the most accommodating day-rooms in the country, and people used it as well as the showers at their own discretion for much of the day. Strangers and long-time residents alike came and went as they pleased. Today however, one needs to subscribe to voluntary confinement for a period of 20 days just to gain admission to the upstairs dorms [the day-room has essentially been transformed into a jail].

Shelters in Portland have come to require all guests be registered and possess ID cards with which they must check in with just to enter the facility. Whereas unhoused people who had empathy and were recognized by 'guests' as one of their own used to run the facilities, today positions are filled with paid social workers who endeavour to make it a job of prestige – to professionalize homelessness. The reasoning behind the shift to registered access is in part explained by the need for more data by agencies seeking funding to justify their 'services'. From an ethnographic perspective, this method of data analysis is horrendously unethical as it

completely interferes with the population being studied. The ends of such methods are not to gain *understanding* of the demographic which the data represents, rather it is just a gluttonous means of accumulating blind tick data to justify more money for their agency. Aside from this, it has long been the case that policy proposals are based on very low standards of study. For example, I recall once reading a report on which a city based actual policy, and the methods were no more than that the author had made a few phone calls to interview those running the shelter!

Such is the state of our methods for understanding the issue we are dealing with.

The professionalization of social services is a thing which has for a century now deliberately handicapped more holistic approaches in which people are encouraged to come together *as a community* to do for themselves. This is in fact why individual case-work dominates the field of social work today; because it allows the social worker to specialize. But communal methods in which people do for themselves – such methods cannot be professionalized.

Everything is a hustle.

Though it seems I've digressed, it was not without purpose. To clarify my point thus far, the council will essentially be forced to backtrack on Wilson's proposed methods, or they will have to in some way address the issue of quality standards and tenant rights in shelters. And it is here that the true difficulty will arise. Its not that such approaches cannot, do not, or even did not once work out splendidly, it is rather that A) communal/tribal forms of culture contrast too starkly with the surrounding domestic culture and [again] B) they are more difficult to professionalize. Ergo, almost as soon as such methods are proposed, others (both in and outside of government) will aim to sabotage them, and it is entirely too easy for them to do so.

I once believed that the issue of communalism in housing could be extricated from the subject of communism [government ownership of property]. Experience however, has led me to conclude that one cannot change things like housing or education unless or until they change government itself, for these things do not change simply because government does not allow them to.

The issue of government evolution or how communal reform can be pursued in a way which fundamentally differs from what is typically conceived of as communism is a subject I do not underestimate, and it goes well beyond the city of Portland, OR. I do however believe we are the precipice of change. The influential words of economic historian Karl Polanyi play in the back of my mind though; "too much change, too fast, is never a good thing".

People have lived outside for hundreds of thousands if not millions of years. Regardless of mayor Wilsons proclaimed goals to 'end unsheltered homelessness in a year', that won't change any time soon. And it shouldn't. After all, why do shelters need to be conceived of as indoor constructs? And why has the previous council endeavoured to reduce the notion of 'outdoor shelter' to PODs (which are essentially just tiny homes btw)? Under the Burnside bridge here in Portland the city once allowed 100 people per night to sleep just for 8 hrs./night. I recall it was peaceful. Sanitary too because the city would clean the sidewalk twice per week. Travellers would play their guitar and strangers found safety in numbers – refuge in the presence of each other rather than in tents. Domestic folks seemed to pick up on and gravitate to this vibe of giving, receiving, welcoming, and refuge. It was only when Mayor Hales enacted his street sweeps in the summer of 2016 that it all went south, and I had a front row seat to it all. Within a couple of weeks more people than that place could accommodate began to show up, and fights broke out as people were forced to compete for 3ft. of sidewalk space to sleep. A man pulled a knife on me in fact, and a month after that a kid got stabbed and he died. Since then the place has been fenced off by PBOT acting on behalf of the company leasing the parking lot adjacent to the sidewalk that people once slept on under the Burnside Bridge, and this represents a public resource being expropriated to a private interest for nearly a decade now. To this the city has simply looked the other way.

Unsheltered people, when left to their own devices, naturally find safety in numbers even more than they do with tents. If you want an economically efficient as well as an expedient way to clear out tents, outdoor shelters would be an excellent start to this ends. As far as the cliché fear that the mere presence of unhoused deters consumers from downtown, consider this; is it the presence of unhoused, or the specific dynamic resulting from the way this demographic has been dealt with which proves so unappealing to people looking to visit downtown? And do people go downtown *just* because it is clean? No, people go downtown to experience *culture*. And unhoused demographic once added rather than subtracted to this. I think its a common mistake [among natives in particular] to always attribute how great downtown once was to the fact they once had a coffee shop or an

art studio nearby. A more fitting explanation to me is this; people who are willing to live with instead of next to one another once were allowed to do so, good vibes grew from this, and they spilled out into the streets for others to pick up on, and for businesses to profit from.

That business interests need to stand in opposition to the interests of unhoused people is an assumption worth questioning. Yet this city has for a decade now opted to build on the mistakes of those who come before us instead of going back to question the initial assumptions which started the downturn of Portland, OR.

A good start to turning the tide for the feel of Portland would be to remove the boulders, bars, and fences which Ted Wheeler made it his aim to multiply since his first year in office. These things have made Portland feel unfree, unwelcoming, and all around unappealing place to be – for everyone who has to lay eyes on them, not just those trying to live on ODOT land.

In closing, I urge the council not to allow the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in the *Grants Pass* decision override common sense when constructing policy. The Grants Pass decision notably avoided specifying standards or tenant rights for shelters which need to be in place before sweeps can be justified. This decision is only the beginning of national scale legislation on 'homelessness'. As of today, this issue remains relatively untested waters for the supreme court, and with good reason. The more the issue gets elevated to the supreme court level it is inevitable that decisions begin to take a decidedly liberal turn against the notion of private property – a foundation we've largely built our entire society upon. This is because land is what's known as a *fictitious commodity* – no one can make it, and no one can objectively justify 'earning' land itself. As a city which has some influence on how other cities approach the issue, the council would do well to consider the potential repercussions of allowing itself to be emboldened by a ruling on a case which began in a rural town in Southern Oregon.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Wayne E. Wignes