

Solutions to the homeless crisis

If Mayor Ted Wheeler wants to leave no stone unturned to help the unhoused, I want to recommend some business-related actions the city needs to take. Many of the reasons people become unhoused are the same factors affecting a broad swath of our population who can't find affordable housing (the "underhoused"). These are young families, minimum-wage and low-wage workers, people with disabilities, seniors outliving their funds, etc.

In Portland, hundreds of thousands of our neighbors whose housing situations are unstable or unaffordable are just hanging on. Not unhoused – yet. But it's a continuum.

For some of these actions, the city would have to partner with state and federal governments. The city knows how to do that when motivated: Outlaw Realtors, banks, real estate investment trusts and institutional investors from buying or holding deeds to residential property intended to be owner-occupied; require that foreclosures of owner-occupied homes be resold to owner-occupiers within 30 days of a bank or mortgage company taking possession; force developers who are given tax breaks in exchange for offering affordable housing to live up to their agreements; prevent commercial property developers from buying up low-income single-room hotel housing to develop high-end hotels and apartments; and raise the minimum wage and outlaw union-busting.

Many of our unhoused and underhoused neighbors work more than one job but can't afford housing. How long will we continue to let corporate greed and wealth extraction drive the priorities of our city?

Dianna Smiley, Portland

Don't forget Yemen and Afghanistan

Ukraine may be in the spotlight, but I would like Congress to shine light and compassion on starvation, especially in children, in Yemen and Afghanistan.

In the first case, we should cease military aid to Saudi Arabia. In the second, we have quite a bit of crow to eat there. Perhaps we can support aid agencies and organizations to do what we cannot.

Bruce Ryan, Rhododendron

Owners of historic homes need breaks

In regard to the recent articles about historic homes and the tax savings to the homeowners for that designation ("Oregon lawmakers change course, move to curtail tax break that benefits owners of million-dollar historic homes," Feb. 18): The thumbnail photo in the original article ("Oregon lawmakers plan to extend tax break that rewards owners of million-dollar historic homes," Feb. 13) shows a client's home that I have had the privilege to work on as a carpenter and more recently as a general contractor for 40 years. I'm sure there are abuses to the rules and questions about the owners' motivation, but many of these owners care about the original architectural integrity of their homes and bear the added expense to maintain that integrity.

I can think of several instances where the expense of repairs and ongoing maintenance of this home was more than double the annual tax savings shown in the article and could have been accomplished at significantly cheaper costs, but to the detriment of the home. I would hope the Legislature looks at why the historic home designation was enacted in the first place, and The Oregonian/OregonLive should present a clearer picture of the rules and not just portray the homeowners as greedy abusers of the rules.

Dean Justice, Portland

OPINION

Instead of mass shelters, let's shelter the masses



Our solutions to houselessness should focus on providing stability, safety and health, the author writes. That includes shelters with walls, a ceiling and a locked door, such as the tiny homes in the Kenton Women's Village, pictured above. Beth Nakamura, file



Candace Avalos

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As I look across our city and reflect on what I'm seeing, I feel a combination of deep pain and profound hope. The economic devastation, suffering and violence are too much to take in. And yet, amidst the chaos, inspiration and hope always peek through as community leaders refuse to give up on creating the Portland we all need and deserve.

Ultimately, we are in desperate need of strategies in all aspects of public policy that seek to reduce harm and center the needs of those most affected.

Nowhere is that need greater than in how our city addresses houselessness. Let's start with our values: our solutions to houselessness must restore stability, safety and health for the unhoused. If our solutions are not grounded in these values, they will continue to be ineffective and inhumane.

Stability means not shuffling people to and from temporary solutions without regard for the retraumatizing nature and the need for consistency. Safety means humans deserve to have walls, a ceiling and a locked door to be at peace in transitional shelter. Massive open shelters, like those briefly proposed by mayoral aide Sam Adams, don't answer either of those needs.

Health means we tie supportive services to every solution with resources and holistic medical care to assist the transition to becoming housed.

People like me on the left side of the political spectrum often get accused of not genuinely wanting to solve houselessness. This is simply untrue. We are all in agreement that humans should not have to live on the streets. But the goal cannot be to get people off the streets without regard for the impact on them. Band aid solutions directly contribute to the cycle of harm that keeps people from gaining stable housing. If our solutions are not trauma informed and therefore people choose to live in their tents instead, that's on us.

Another way shelters fail to meet the individual and diverse needs of people living on the streets is that they are often high barrier, meaning if you have issues in addition to being unhoused (mental health, substance abuse, disabilities, etc) you may be denied entry to multiple shelters until you no longer have the energy to

look. Street Roots' Domicile Unknown report relayed the tragic story of Chris Madson-Yamasaki, who passed away struggling to get the care he needed for both drug use and mental illness while on the streets due to shelter requirements he could not meet. He could not break free of the cycle of harm that most of our unhoused community members endure.

Here's where the hope comes in. In response to Adams' terrible suggestion of pressuring 3,000 unhoused people into mass shelter spaces and Mayor Ted Wheeler's equally unhelpful plan to pressure people to move their tents into massive camps, Kaia Sand, executive director of Street Roots suggested a different approach.

Instead, she asks, can we challenge ourselves as a city to find 3,000 livable spaces with supportive services where unhoused folks can begin the transition into more stable housing? This is a ripe opportunity for the public and private sector to team up.

We need a diversity of options to get through this, including: creating safe rest villages with tiny homes; converting hotels like Project Turnkey does across the state; officially sanctioning existing villages like Hazelnut Grove; opening parking lots for RVs; and landlords teaming up with nonprofits like JOIN PDX to sign "master leases" in which the organization is responsible to the landlord for rental obligations on behalf of formerly unhoused tenants placed in the landlord's units. Then, with the funding that voters passed in 2020, we can provide mental health, substance use and other supportive services that can help those who are houseless regain stability. Let's tap into Portland's civic and entrepreneurial spirit to get creative about finding shelter for 3,000 Portlanders in 2022 that is grounded in our values of stability, safety, and health for our unhoused neighbors — rather than grounded in convenience and comfort for groups like People for Portland.

Lastly, I'll leave you with a bible lesson I learned at a young age. One of Jesus' miracles, the story goes, was when he took five loaves and two fishes, and multiplied them to feed 5,000. But a family friend told me what he believed was the story's true meaning: every family had fishes and loaves, but some didn't have enough and some had more than they needed. Jesus then combined their resources so there was enough to feed everyone. The lesson wasn't about Jesus' miracle, which seems outside of our power, but instead about how we all hold the capacity to pitch in.

Let's bring our loaves and fishes and get to work feeding — or sheltering — the masses.