

Portland developers pitch \$100 million homeless campus



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A pair of high-flying Portland developers hope to build support for a \$100 million-plus homeless campus to serve as a "one-stop-shop" for 1,400 people in search of nightly shelter and on-site assistance.

The unparalleled vision is being pitched by Homer Williams and Dike Dame, who have elevated their careers by delivering grand, if not initially audacious, concepts in the formerly forlorn Pearl and South Waterfront districts.

They're now fixated on 14 acres of riverfront property owned by the city, hoping to emulate the successful "[Haven for Hope](#)" **homeless facility in San Antonio, Texas**. Williams is pushing the local concept – dubbed "Oregon Trail to Hope" – with a goal of securing some \$60 million from businesses and foundations, leaving government agencies to pick up the rest.

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"I think we can get it done here," he said in an interview with The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board on Monday. "It's not going to be easy."

If built, the campus could fill a void by offering long-term shelter and assistance for a large chunk of Multnomah County's homeless population, **estimated last year at 3,800**. And the prospect of steering homeless people off the streets could be alluring to **downtown business groups who recently sued Mayor Charlie Hales over lax enforcement of anti-camping rules**.

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But the concept has been met publicly and privately with skepticism by some politicians who question the financial viability, size and underlying motivations of building such a campus. It's not yet clear if the idea can become anything more than a pipe dream.

"Everything should be looked at," said Josh Alpert, chief of staff for Hales, who praised Williams' ingenuity. But he cautioned that the concept may be so large that it borders on warehousing homeless residents. "In a nutshell, I don't think the scale is right for what we're trying to do here in Portland."

Williams and Dame have spent recent weeks working to build excitement about the idea, meeting with local non-profit providers as well as city and county leaders. Multnomah County Chairwoman Deborah Kafoury even flew with Williams to San Antonio, spending two days this month learning about the model that captured his attention.

"We need the business community's involvement," Kafoury said. "And if this is an idea that sparks interest from the business community, I will be there to make it work for our entire community."

Williams hopes to nail down construction estimates, operating costs and a financing plan by March 2017. Among others, he is working with Don Mazziotti, Portland's ex-urban renewal director from the early 2000s, when Williams and Dame **inked a city deal to develop the South Waterfront**.

Williams said he's hoping to raise about \$360,000 to cover early costs, and has been collecting contributions from the business community.

"Nobody's turned me down," he said.

But despite his work championing the concept, Williams said he would not develop the project if it's ultimately built. "I don't want to get into a conflict," he said.

Williams envisions a project serving 1,400 people, with 700 sleeping in shelter space and 700 in transitional dormitory-style housing.

"It would be very simple," he said of the shelter. "It's going to be a lot of beds in a really big room."

Meanwhile, those living in transitional units could stay up to two years. "These people really need to rebuild their lives," he said.

Modeled after San Antonio's project, Williams wants to include office and meeting spaces for wrap-around services, such as health care and addiction counseling. It would also feature dining facilities, showers and outdoor areas for social events. He hopes to keep costs to \$100 million but said they could reach \$120 million.

San Antonio's project cost \$100.5 million to build. The campus, which opened in 2010, operates on an annual budget of about \$15.5 million.

One immediate bellwether to gauge the viability of Williams' plan will be the fate of his proposed location, at **2400 N.W. Front Ave.**

The property – which long ago served as the Port of Portland's Terminal 1 – is zoned for industrial use and has a **market value of about \$8.6 million**, according to property records. City officials plan to list it for sale in mid July, and it could fetch far more from companies searching for a large, centrally located piece of industrial land along the Willamette River.

But the parcel is owned by the Bureau of Environmental Services, which is legally **prohibited from spending ratepayers' money to subsidize non-utility endeavors**. That means the City Council or Multnomah County would need to step in to buy the property with discretionary money – if officials are supportive.

Williams' involvement – and his record of piecing together big projects – should "jump start the conversation faster about, 'Well, should we buy this land?'" Alpert said.

Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the sewer bureau, isn't interested. Fish wants to see the property sold for top dollar to a business that adds jobs on scarce industrial land.

"Our job is to recover maximum value in the sale for ratepayers," said Jim Blackwood, a policy director for Fish.

Another sign that Williams may not have the necessary support: the typically publicity-adverse developer is openly talking about his proposal.

Williams and Dame made an initial pitch more than three months ago to Hales and Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau. They met at the developers' Pearl District offices March 10 with representatives from San Antonio, **calendars show.**

The next month, Willamette Week reported that Saltzman was **interested in leasing part of Terminal 1 for a long-term shelter.** No one mentioned Williams' proposal.

Saltzman confirmed that he supports Williams' concept generally. But Saltzman said funding hasn't come up, including any discussion about tapping money from a proposed **\$250 million housing bond measure** slated for the November ballot.

"I'd handicap it very favorably, and I think it's a great idea," Saltzman told The Oregonian/OregonLive of Williams' vision.

Williams, 71, downplayed any potential hurdles Monday and said his idea simply requires a lot of work.

That's not necessarily unusual for a developer versed in pitching the unimaginable, from the **sprawling Forest Heights subdivision in Portland's West Hills to the high-rise condo towers that epitomize the South Waterfront.**

Williams said he believes the Portland campus could become a national model to help homeless residents, offering workable solutions to complex problems.

And, if successful, Williams said it would represent a crowning achievement.

"This is just, I don't know," he said, shaking his head, searching for the right word. "Important."

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