It takes a village

What can Seattle learn from Portland's homeless camp?

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The cottages are small, little more than shacks. Some have porches that sag under the weight of bikes and coolers. Others have real windows and doors, and are surrounded by potted plants and vegetable gardens.

The simple structures made from salvaged wood sit on borrowed land, a 1.5-acre tract near the airport that the City of Portland lets residents use.

Together, the 43 homes comprise Dignity Village, a self-managed community homeless folks carved from the fat of the Oregon land.

That same largesse keeps it running. Residents have yard sales and sell castoffs on eBay to raise the money to pay for electricity and water. They also elect a council to manage the camp and throw out rule-breakers.

Depending upon whom you talk to, Dignity Village is either a model of self-sufficiency or an alt-living experiment gone horribly awry. As Mayor McGinn readies a plan to build a transitional encampment on city-owned South Seattle property, City Councilmembers Sally Bagshaw, Nick Licata and Tom Rasmussen went to Portland March 4 to get their on take on the place.

All came back praising the villagers' independence.

“They literally built their own houses, they do their own self-management,” Licata said.

There’s another side to Dignity Village that councilmembers might not have seen on their 60-minute tour. Behind the cozy-looking cottages, plans for structural improvements have stalled, code enforcement is lax, and after a dozen years residents still use Porta-Potties instead of flush toilets. The camp offers no social services for those who live there.

As a result, in more than a decade, the now-permanent encampment has been largely unsuccessful at moving a significant number of people out of homelessness, a goal some say it was never designed to fulfill.

Dignity Village, for many residents, is more than a place to live; it's a way of life.

City officials see it as a transitional encampment, but according to a 2010 Portland Housing Bureau report, most residents view it as a permanent alternative
As Mayor McGinn prepares to build a homeless camp at the site of a former peanut butter factory in SODO, Dignity Village presents both a model of collective living and a cautionary tale.

The dignity of the village

Dignity Village was born of protest. In the winter of 2000, eight men and women pitched tents in downtown Portland and demanded a place of their own where the police couldn’t move them along. The City of Portland prohibits camping on public property, and every time they were forced to move, members of “Camp Dignity” captured headlines by parading across Portland with shopping carts of their belongings.

Eventually, the campers moved to Sunderland Yard, the site of a city leaf-recycling facility. In 2007, the city signed a three-year contract that allowed them to stay on part of the site if the camp covered all its costs.

Since then, campers have paid their own way. Residents of Dignity Village raise the camp’s monthly $1,500 to $2,000 in expenses from three small businesses—an eBay auction of unneeded items that people donate to the camp, a regular yard sale at the site and selling cords of wood that the campers chop up from donated lumber, the camp’s chief executive, Jonathan Hawkes, said.

Each camper is required to put in 10 hours a week by working a business, serving on the camp’s security detail or other chores. The most common reason people are ejected from the camp, Hawkes said, is not putting in their hours.

On one level, it works. In her February 2010 evaluation report on Dignity Village, consultant Kristina Smock says the camp has done a relatively good job of meeting its expenses and providing a survival mechanism for the homeless.

It’s also dirt-cheap, a feature not lost on Councilmember Tom Rasmussen.

“They don’t, I believe, take any public dollars from the city or any other public agency, which is remarkable,” he said.

Survival versus ‘outcomes’

Since it costs the city nothing, Dignity Village may seem like a bargain, but Portland city leaders get what they pay for. Camp leadership is spotty and disorganized. With their one-year terms on the council, elected leaders come and go, creating turnover and disorganization. As a result, the camp has never finished its site plan, built a long-awaited kitchen and bathrooms and has no way to raise any money, according to the consultant’s report.

Donors have drifted away because they felt snubbed, the report says, making it
more of a struggle for the camp to cover its costs. In the first year of the contract, the City of Portland had to cover the cost of the liability insurance that the city requires, said Sally Erickson, manager of Portland’s Ending Homelessness Initiative.

Like Nickelsville, the two-year-old tent city that hopes to move to Seattle’s proposed encampment site, Dignity Village offers no services like counseling or job referral because residents don’t want them.

Case managers would only lord over them and set silly deadlines for getting into housing when there’s no low-income housing to be had, residents of Dignity Village and Nickelsville say.

Erickson, of Portland’s Ending Homelessness Initiative, said it’s not enough.

“If you create a campground and there’s no exit strategy, where do [people] go if they’re not getting connected to affordable housing and a sustainable income?” she asked.

Although one man has lived at Dignity Village since its inception, the consultant’s report says the average stay is 18 months, which is comparable to transitional housing, but shelters and transitional housing tend to do a better job placing people in homes. About half of those who do move out are evicted for breaking the rules.

Dignity Village’s greatest indignity may be what it fails to achieve. The report shows that 70 percent of those who leave Dignity Village go right back to being homeless.

Peter Fry, a planning consultant who helped site some of Portland’s shelters and was once excited about Dignity Village, said the camp’s residents now seem to be enabling homelessness, rather than addressing it: “You need to intervene and help people deal with the issues that are causing them to live on the street,” Fry said.

Lessons for Seattle

While Dignity Village costs Portland little, Seattle’s city-backed encampment stands to ring up a much bigger tab, in part because the city plans to offer case management.

The capital expenses of setting up such facilities at Seattle’s Sunny Jim site would be $620,000, Deputy Mayor Darryl Smith has said, plus a $202,000 contract to provide case managers at the site.

It’s hardly the only hurdle. As this story was being written, city councilmembers returned McGinn’s proposed Sunny Jim legislation, saying they couldn’t take action on it until an environmental review was complete. McGinn responded, saying that while council cannot take final action to approve a project before an environmental review is complete, they can still consider the legislation.
“That is all we ever expected,” McGinn said in the statement. He sent the full package back to the council and asked them to give it prompt consideration, “so that we have a solution ready before next winter.”

Rasmussen has doubts about the viability of the Sunny Jim site. From a land-use perspective, it has a lot of problems, and the city needs to look at other sites, he said.

Whatever Seattle ends up doing, it should differ from Dignity Village by offering more services and a pathway into permanent housing, he said.

But Bagshaw said she doesn’t think the city should spend money duplicating services that are already available elsewhere in the city. And while she and her colleagues on the council praised the community for its self-determination, Dignity Village’s biggest takeaway for Seattle may be that it isn’t, in fact, a tent city.

“The mayor is proposing the city pay to operate a tent city for up to 100 people who need temporary housing,” Bagshaw wrote in her blog after the tour.

Rather than spend the money on tents and capital construction, she wondered, “wouldn’t we be smarter to invest the $700,000 in smart looking dormitory style housing throughout the city where people who need shelter have some privacy and warmth?”

DIGNITY VILLAGE
October 2000
Portland’s Street Roots newspaper helps launch “Out of the Doorways” campaign
December 2000
Eight men and women pitch tents in a muddy field beside the Broadway Bridge near downtown Portland
January - September 2001
Camp Dignity uses shopping carts to move to Fremont Bridge, Morrison Bridge, River Place and back to Fremont Bridge
September 2001
The camp splits into three factions. One goes to a farm. Another occupies a field at Naito Parkway. The third moves to Sunderland Yard
October - December 2001
Dignity Village files articles of incorporation with the State of Oregon and applies for nonprofit status with the IRS
February 2004
After Dignity Village fails to secure private land, the Portland City Council passes a resolution allowing it to stay at Sunderland Yard
May 2007
City of Portland signs a three-year contract for the camp to stay at Sunderland Yard, but requires residents to relocate to another part of the property. Cottage building begins
February 2010
A consultant releases report evaluating the camp’s successes and failures. She recommends a three-year contract extension with certain changes

January 2011
The City of Portland agrees to contract extension of six months. The contract expires June 30
Source: Street Roots, Kristina Smock Consulting

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