

HB 2006 Testimony
Thursday, April 15, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Jama and members of the Senate Committee on Housing and Development.

My name is Will White, and I am Vice-Chair of the Board of Hood River Shelter Services. I am testifying today in support of House Bill 2006.

Hood River Shelter Services began providing winter shelter in 2010 after one of our citizens died from exposure sleeping outdoors during the winter. For most of the last decade, our small nonprofit provided the only winter shelter in the Columbia River Gorge. Starting in 2017 our guest slept in bunk beds in a confined space in the basement of a local church.

With the arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic in the spring of 2020, this confined indoor model was no longer safe. We worked with the City and County of Hood River, the Port of Hood River, and nearly a dozen churches in an effort to find a location that could be approved. Even with the 90-day emergency siting legislation in place, it was almost impossible to find a site where we could provide shelter.

At the eleventh hour (literally day 90 of the emergency siting period), a local church voted to allow us to set up modular shelters in their parking lot. We then met with neighbors of the church and other interested parties to explain our program and hear their concerns. We worked closely with local law enforcement, and our staff responded whenever there were any problems – which occurred very infrequently.

The church approval, however, was given for just one year. If this church had not welcomed our program, anyone without housing last winter would have been sleeping on the streets, in a car, or in a tent hidden somewhere in the woods. Those were the conditions that led to one of our neighbors dying outdoors in the winter eleven years ago. I listened to testimony before the House Committee on Housing last month. I was gratified to see bipartisan support for this bill, and to hear moving supportive comments from all members the committee – Republican and Democrat, rural and urban. Some legislators had met and talked with unhoused individuals who later in the winter suffered frostbite or, in one case, died due to exposure.

Without HB 2006, Hood River will very likely not be able approve an appropriate site in time for next winter's shelter season. Zoning requirements would narrow our options, and the normal requirements for public hearings, conditional use permits, and appeals would likely take more than a year. I know this from the ten years I spend developing affordable housing.

We all know that the tent encampments lining the roadways and hidden on the edge of wilder areas in our communities is not safe, adequate housing. It can also create the perception or the reality of problems in surrounding neighborhoods. The way to avoid or minimize this problem is by allowing rapid emergency approval of sites for homeless shelters in our communities during this pandemic. No one should have to spend the cold winter living in a tent because they have no better alternative they can afford. Please vote to approve HB 2006. It will sunset in June of 2022, and at that point we hope the pandemic will be under control and organizations like ours will have secured suitable sites. House Bill 2006 will have a significant, positive, and stabilizing impact on homeless services throughout Oregon.

Thank you for your time.