

October 11, 2017

To Mayor Ted Wheeler, City of Portland
Chair Deborah Kafourey, Multnomah County
Marc Jolin, Director, Joint Office of Homeless Services

Re: Proposed shelter in Old Town/Chinatown

In 2006, researchers Lasana Harris and Susan Fiske conducted a study to determine if there is a neurological difference in the way test subjects perceived different groups of people. They used neuroimaging technology to monitor the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC,) the area of the brain that is activated when we distinguish between human faces or experience or express empathy, as participants were shown photos of people and objects. What they found was disturbing. Photos of people from every group activated participants' mPFCs. Every group that is but one—people the study participants perceived as homeless.¹ In other words, we struggle to see those we think are homeless as human, instead our brains respond to these people as if they were literally objects.

This neurological error was on full display in recent meetings and statements made by the Old Town/Chinatown Community Association (OTCTCA) regarding a proposed 200 bed shelter to be located in the neighborhood. While it should go without saying, it seems we are in need of a reminder of a basic and fundamental fact; the “homeless” are human beings. Our neighbors who are currently unhoused are people who deserve—as we all do—dignity, respect, and the opportunity to participate in making decisions that directly affect our lives. Unfortunately, it seems that this reality is in danger of being overlooked once again.

Our community association wrote to you on September 20 declining to support a proposed 200-bed shelter at NW Hoyt and NW 3rd Avenue, a recommendation that was, according to that letter, “based on a community vote after two community meetings held on September 6, 2017”² But democracy is only democratic when everyone is at the table. While the recommendation of OTCTCA has a veneer of democracy there are serious issues we feel must be addressed. Neighborhood and/or community associations can do important work and have the potential to be a valuable resource for our City. Even so, they are organizations that exist to advocate for the interests of a specific segment of the communities they serve—namely property owners and businesses. This on its own is not necessarily a problem; we agree that these stakeholders deserve to be heard. However, when OTCTCA makes recommendations to the City on behalf of the community, we, as members of this community, feel compelled to say clearly that they do not speak for us. Further, they do not represent and have not made serious efforts to hear from the people whom the results of this decision will most immediately impact. There are many groups who will be impacted by an additional shelter in the neighborhood—businesses, property owners, renters, etc. However, the possible impacts on those of us without access to shelter are potentially dire, and should take precedence in your decision making.

It is not the place of any organization, be it a community association or even a non-profit, no matter how well-meaning, to speak in place of people whom have not been included in decision-making processes and who are fully capable of speaking for themselves.

1 Harris, L. T., & Fiske, S. T. “Dehumanizing the lowest of the low: Neuro-imaging responses to extreme outgroups,” *Psychological Science*, 17 (2006). pp. 847-853.

2 Ying, Helen. “Letter Sent to The Joint Office of Homeless Services by OTCTCA”, *PDX Old Town*. September 20 2017.
<http://mailchi.mp/bd49a8fcf21c/letter-sent-to-the-joint-office-of-homeless-services-by-otctca?e=9bd9892dd6>

And so, we vehemently encourage you to decline to make any decisions that predominately affect the lives of low income and unhoused citizens of this City without their input. We ask you to be suspicious of “hand-shake deals” (ratified by the City or not) when the agreeing parties were not the people most affected by the outcomes. We implore you to be wary of arguments that focus on statistics without telling the stories of the people behind them or that fixate on the numbers of shelter beds or low-income housing units without making reference to the lives of the people who fill them. We challenge you to speak-up when people bemoan “the homelessness problem” and affirm with us that people who are unhoused or experiencing poverty are not a problem, a blight, or a burden to be measured, passed around and distributed; they are our friends, members of our communities and our neighbors. Finally, because each of us is the best expert on our own life, we ask you to recognize and affirm that the people who are the best equipped to help design solutions to poverty and the lack of affordable housing in Portland are those of us who are the most directly affected by them.

If our brains are conditioned to dehumanize, to literally objectify people who are unhoused, then we have an obligation to work to build relationships until we once again learn to recognize everyone in our City and on our streets as a human person. As the debate about the proposed shelter in Old Town continues, the City must listen to all of the voices in this neighborhood and prioritize the perspectives of those of us who have the most at stake.

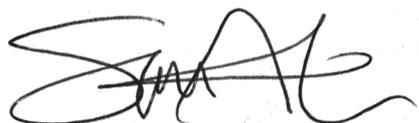
Sincerely,
Sisters of the Road



Bryn Harding
Communications Manager,
Sisters of the Road



Karissa Moden
Systemic Change Program Director,
Sisters of the Road



Sarah Louise Allen
MFA, Education Coordinator
p:ear mentor



Beth Burns
Executive Director
p:ear mentor

cc:
Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, City of Portland
Commissioner Nick Fish, City of Portland
Commissioner Dan Saltzman, City of Portland
Commissioner Amanda Fritz, City of Portland