

Memorandum

Date: Tuesday, April 12, 2022
To: MERC Commissioners
From: Lynn Peterson, Metro Council President
Subject: **Discussion of Safe Park at Portland Expo Center**

Overview

Metro Council President Peterson and Commissioners Hardesty and Ryan are requesting that the Metropolitan Exposition Recreation Commission (MERC) consider a Safe Park location on Portland Expo Center (Expo) property. Metro staff have proposed the three options outlined below for MERC consideration.

Background

MERC is responsible for the oversight of Expo as well as the Oregon Convention Center and the Portland's Centers for the Arts. In this role, MERC can direct the authority of Metro's Chief Operating Officer regarding the management and operation of these venues. To the extent there is a request to change the use of Expo, MERC must approve this change to the Expo operations.

Expo is the largest multi-purpose facility in Oregon, with a 53-acre campus and 5 exhibit halls. Metro Council and MERC have directed staff to work on an Expo Development Opportunity Study (DOS) to assess the value and opportunities for use of Expo for the greatest public benefit, while recognizing and addressing the various historically and culturally significant events that occurred on or near the Expo campus. These include the internment of Japanese Americans during and after WWII, as well as the 1948 Vanport Flood, which disproportionately took the lives and livelihoods of Black Portlanders.

That study is ongoing, and MERC recently voted to approve guiding principles to be used as criteria when assessing potential future uses of Expo. While future use of Expo is under assessment through the DOS process, it continues to host approximately 120 events annually, and continues to have economic impacts on the region.

Meanwhile, greater Portland is facing an unparalleled crisis of homelessness and housing insecurity, compounded by two years of pandemic impacts. Metro's work in this area is moving at a rapid pace. More than 1,000 new affordable apartments are under construction across greater Portland through Metro's affordable housing bond program, and another 1,800 are in permitting and design stages. The regional Supportive Housing Services program, launched in July 2021, helped more than 450 people move from homelessness to permanent supportive housing in its first six months, and has supported funding for 1,640 shelter beds region-wide.



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Other organizations around the region are collaborating to reduce houselessness using a variety of methods. Across the region, and specifically in North Portland, many people are sleeping in vehicles or RVs parked in rights-of-way where they have limited access to services. The City of Portland recently announced a Safe Park location in North Portland that will provide space for roughly 60 vehicles. There remains an urgent need for more Safe Park programs around the region however, particularly in North Portland, where a significant population is already living in cars and RVs.

Last fall, the City of Portland and Metro discussed the possibility of a Safe Park program at Expo, and the City decided to explore other locations due to the potential costs associated with hosting a site at Expo. Despite investments and increases in services for houseless populations, the need for services, sites for Safe Park and collaboration between organizations persists. Therefore, the Metro Council President and the City of Portland wish to discuss designating a Safe Park site at Expo with MERC.

Request

The Metro Council President and the City of Portland request MERC consider designating a portion of Expo for a Safe Park location for an 18-21 month duration, while regional partners work diligently to reduce houselessness and housing insecurity in greater Portland. Below you will find details on proposed locations. After due consideration and analysis, Metro staff have concluded that any locations on the Expo campus outside of what is outlined below would be incompatible with the ongoing use and business needs at Expo, and MERC would need to consider cancelling contracts in order to make those available for Safe Park.

Upper lot 5

Upper lot 5, shown in the attached map, is the most suitable location for a Safe Park site at Expo given the City's site preferences. This site is already paved, level, has one light pole and is located on N. Expo Rd. with easy access to Force Ave. and public transportation. This lot would require minimal improvement to meet City of Portland code requirements for a Safe Park location.

Known barriers: This lot is used for staging for large events, with tractor trailers parked here. This lot is currently used for outdoor storage and is occasionally utilized for additional parking. Designating this lot as a Safe Park site would limit flexibility for staging and overflow parking at Expo. Some trenching to connect to sewer would be required.

Upper lot 6- upper portion

Upper lot 6, shown in Exhibit A, would also be a suitable location for a Safe Park site at Expo. This lot is level, has one light pole with limited power and electrical infrastructure and is located on N. Expo Rd. with easy access to Force Ave. and public transportation.

Known barriers: This site would require moderate improvements to meet City of Portland code requirements for a Safe Park location, including paving. This lot is used for long-term storage and supplemental parking roughly 12 times per year. Some trenching to connect to sewer would be required.

Upper lot 6- lower portion

The lower portion of upper lot 6 is currently accessible only through the upper portion of the lot. This lot is used infrequently and is obstructed from view. This lot requires some leveling, does not currently have access to power and is partially covered with vegetation.

Known barriers: This site would require significant improvements to meet City of Portland code requirements for a Safe Park location, including leveling, paving, trenching and vegetation removal.

If directed to begin discussions with the City, Metro staff will begin to develop cost estimates for each proposed location in collaboration with the City. Staff have also begun to explore options for reducing capital costs with City of Portland staff and could continue to pursue these options at the direction of MERC.

Policy questions

- Would MERC consider designating a Safe Park location on the Portland Expo Center campus at upper lot 5 or 6?
- If so, what parameters should staff consider when developing a Safe Park proposal with the City?
- What types of site improvements/changes would MERC permit on the Expo campus?



Portland Expo Center property

Safe Park option