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September 11, 2020

Cumberland County Board of Commissioners
142 Federal Street
Portland, ME 04101

Dear Chairman Coward and the Board of Commissioners of Cumberland County,

On August 14, 2020 Portland City Manager Jon Jennings wrote to County Manager Jim Gailey to request that the County Commissioners discuss the possibility for the Cross Insurance Arena to be temporarily used “for the purpose of providing temporary day space and services as well as overnight emergency shelter space for persons experiencing homelessness in our community.”

We understand that the CIA Trustees read the City Manager’s request and are not recommending the arena be considered for this purpose. However, we respectfully ask that before you make a decision on this matter, you take the time to explore this issue further by speaking directly with representatives from the City of Portland such as City Manager Jon Jennings, Director of Health and Human Services Kristen Dow, and Mayor Kate Snyder. It is imperative that you have a full understanding of the current situation in the community, the challenges we are facing in the Greater Portland region, and the potential short- and long-term solutions we see on the horizon with help from our partners at the County and State levels.

THE SITUATION

As City Manager Jennings explained in his letter, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many former resources designed to assist people experiencing homelessness are no longer available. The pandemic has also required the City of Portland to implement new social distancing protocols that have vastly diminished our capacity to shelter unhoused individuals.

The Oxford Street Shelter used to be able to accommodate 154 individuals with another 75-100 in nearby overflow facilities. It can now only accommodate 75 individuals, not even a third of its former capacity. As a result, we have opened an additional 75 beds at the Portland Expo and are currently sheltering more than 200 people in area hotels each night (see chart below).

Facility	Pre-COVID Capacity	Current Capacity
Oxford Street Shelter (OSS)	154	75
Overflow space for the OSS at the Preble Street Resource Center Day Room	75	No longer available for use.
Other City of Portland overflow spaces for the OSS	30+	No longer available for use.
Family Shelter Buildings	130	Being used to provide shelter for unhoused people with exposure to COVID who are awaiting test results and/or to quarantine unhoused people with active COVID cases. Limited capacity for families at this time. Many families being sheltered in area hotels.
Portland Expo	Not in use pre-pandemic	75
Area Hotels & Motels	Not in use pre-pandemic	242 (187 single adults + 28 families)

As the chart above indicates, in addition to accommodating many people in City facilities, we have well over 200 individuals being sheltered in area hotels each night. This is not a sustainable practice, nor is it a best practice. Being spread out like this makes it difficult for folks to access the services they need to assist them in obtaining permanent housing while also making it tough for area providers to track individuals in need of service, follow their progress, and provide assistance.

The spaces that the City of Portland currently has available to offer overnight shelter to unhoused individuals is inadequate, and our capacity to offer day space is even more limited. We need to find alternatives quickly, particularly as the weather gets colder and individuals will not be able to remain outside for large portions of the day.

THE TRUSTEES’ RECOMMENDATION

In the letter communicating their recommendation concerning use of the Cross Insurance Arena, the Trustees’ write:

We consider the Arena to be the public’s property; and recognize that in times of crisis, a facility like ours can be put to creative use in order to solve problems and serve the common good.

We very much appreciate this sentiment and contend that this is, in fact, a time of crisis. We also believe that the hurdles identified in the Trustees’ letter are, in fact, surmountable and should be

discussed in greater depth before a final decision on this matter is contemplated. Our responses to the Trustees' three areas of concern are enumerated below.

- *Contract Obligations*

While we understand the Trustees' concerns regarding contract obligations at the Cross Insurance Arena, we also recognize that in years past, when the CIA was under construction, the Portland Pirates were able to play at the Androskoggin Bank Colisee in Lewiston. Had there not been contract disputes following that hiatus from the CIA, the Pirates would have started up again in Portland the following season without missing a beat.

Though moving the Mariners to Lewiston for a season may be a difficult task to accomplish, it could certainly be considered, especially since there will most likely be no attendees at games this season. One of the biggest concerns in moving the team away for a season before was how the fan base would react and how that would impact future ticket sales. That is not a consideration at this time as fans will not likely be allowed to gather in large arenas until COVID is fully under control. In some ways, the pandemic makes a temporary team relocation easier.

- *Appropriateness of the CIA to serve as temporary shelter*

Another concern the Trustees express in their letter is the suitability of the CIA for use as a temporary shelter. While this may in fact be a valid concern, we encourage you to discuss this more fully with staff experienced in running such a facility. Perhaps it is a poor fit. Perhaps not. But certainly this is something that should be evaluated by professional staff accustomed to doing this type of work before being used as a reason to deny the City's request.

- *Insurance*

The Trustees have expressed concern that the Arena's insurance does not cover this particular purpose. We suspect the Arena's insurance also did not cover its potential use as "an emergency Alternative Care Site should the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic force hospitals beyond their capacity," and yet, as the Trustees state, it has been slated for that use in coordination with State agencies and area hospitals. Clearly the insurance issue must have been worked out in that case.

Finally, in recommending that the Commissioners turn down the City of Portland's request, the Trustees state:

We support ongoing efforts to activate sites that already exist in the city and were designed to provide these critical services.

But that is precisely the issue: THERE ARE NONE. If there were, we would be pressing them into service immediately. Unfortunately, the buildings we are currently using to provide emergency shelter comprise a 1900s duplex, multiple three-unit Victorian era homes, an old auto garage,

the gymnasium at the Expo, and area hotel and motel rooms. While the City is currently working to design, fund, and build—for the first time—a facility designed to provide temporary shelter to people experiencing homelessness, that facility does not yet exist. We do hope to expedite its construction, but in the meantime, we need alternatives. Hence, City Manager Jon Jennings' letter on the Portland City Council's behalf.

As you consider the City of Portland's request at your meeting on Monday, September 14, 2020, we hope you will take our comments into consideration and delay your vote until you have had time to speak directly with City Manager Jennings and appropriate city staff and elected officials about this matter.

We thank you for your time and for your service to the community.

Sincerely,

Belinda Ray, City Councilor, District 1
Chair, HHS & Public Safety Committee

Tae Chong, City Councilor, District 3
Member, HHS & Public Safety Committee

Kimberly Cook, City Councilor, District 5
Member, Housing Committee

Kate Snyder, Mayor of the City of Portland

Jill Duson, City Councilor, At-large
Chair, Housing Committee

Pious Ali, City Councilor, At-large
Member, HHS & Public Safety Committee
and Housing Committee

cc: County Manager Jim Gailey
City Manager Jon Jennings
Director of Health & Human Services Kristen Dow
HHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew
Governor Janet T. Mills
Dan Brennan, Maine Housing
Jeremy Kennedy
Portland City Council