

# Clackamas County moves forward with plan for drug treatment campus

By Conrad Wilson

Oct. 19, 2024

The six-acre campus will offer detox, residential treatment beds and other recovery services.

Clackamas County is moving forward with a drug treatment center at the site of a former elementary school.

On Thursday, commissioners approved \$3.5 million to purchase the former Clackamas Elementary School located at 15301 SE 92nd Ave. in Clackamas.

The six-acre campus will offer detox, residential treatment beds, medication-assisted treatment for opioids, transitional housing and may also include medical and dental care, according to county officials.

“Citizens look at us and wonder: What are their leaders doing?” Clackamas County Commission Ben West said during Thursday’s meeting. “How much longer do they have to step over bodies? Or see human despair in the streets and mass dysfunction and massive bureaucracies unable to actually deal with the people that are suffering in our communities?”

West acknowledged the county was still early in the process of opening the recovery center.

“We can’t house our way out of this,” West said, referencing the state’s current addiction and mental health crisis. “I can tell you, someone living in a tent on the sidewalk, what their brand-new, government-paid-for apartment will look like by looking at their tent.”

Researchers and homeless advocates who support a housing-first approach say providing people housing with fewer barriers helps them stabilize and access programs such as drug treatment.

According to the county, the center won’t serve as a shelter or drop-in location. At the same time, the county states a “key focus” of the facility will be to provide “immediate access for individuals in need.”

Referrals could come from police, hospitals, family members or people wanting to refer themselves to treatment. People could stay up to 18 months, according to the county.

“A lot of work still needs to be done to determine the viability of the old Clackamas Elementary School, so there’s no way to determine right now how many people it could serve,” a spokesperson for the county told OPB in response to written questions.

In September, Oregon recriminalized drug possession, adding a provision called deflection, which in some cases allows people who are arrested for drug possession to connect with treatment rather than face criminal penalties.

While officials say the center's ambitions go well beyond deflection, Clackamas County District Attorney John Wentworth, whose office oversees the county's deflection program, said he could see the center playing an important role with law enforcement and his office.

"There's a great deal of opportunity here," Wentworth told OPB. "It would make complete sense if we have the opportunity in our deflection program to not just send people to this facility, but to have the services that they need there and to have this opportunity to deflect folks to a program that's all set up and ready to help them however they need. It sounds like an exciting concept."

Wentworth said the center is several years from opening.

The county is initially trying to raise \$15 to 20 million to build out the center but has a larger goal of \$35 to 40 million.