

National Report

The New York Times

Home for the Homeless But Can It Continue?

Oregon Experiment Reaches Crossroads

By SARAH KERSHAW

PORTLAND, Ore., Sept. 28 — Dignity Village, a tiny community on the northeastern edge of Portland, convened an emergency session of its legislature the other evening.

The 26 representatives present sat in a circle on ragtag chairs collected over the years from garbage dumps and curbsides, near a wide puddle they call Lake Dignity. The chairman of the nine-member Dignity Village governing council was there, along with the heads of most departments: the treasurer, the secretary and chairwoman of the tents and population committee, the security chairman, the trash and sanitation chairman, the toiletmeister and the coffeemeister.

They had an urgent item on the agenda: the uncertain future of their village, an unusual encampment of more than 60 homeless people living in tents or one-room shacks built of plywood, tarpaulins, plastic sheeting and anything else that could be scavenged and hauled in old wheelchairs and shopping carts.

Dignity Village is no squatter's

village Council. "It's a lot better than nothing, but we're going to have more."

The city seems amenable to allowing the villagers to stay at least a few more months. They plan to present a formal proposal to the city by Oct. 15, and city officials have agreed to postpone a final decision until then.

The Dignity Village Legislature — which includes anyone who lives there — will now debate whether to try to stay put for the foreseeable future, on an asphalt lot at a city leaf-composting plant near the Portland Airport, and possibly propose expanding.

But there is growing opposition to the village in Portland, a city of 530,000 where roughly 1,800 people sleep in shelters or on the streets on a given night. That number is growing along with the city's poverty rate, city officials say.

Critics say that Dignity Village is unsafe, that fire hazards abound, that the encampment, a 40-minute bus ride from downtown Portland, is too isolated. They say the city, which is absorbing about \$15,000 annually in maintenance and rent costs for the village, should funnel that money to other services for the homeless.

"I respected the intent and desire of the people who back Dignity Village," said Jim Francesconi, one of the five Portland city commissioners, including the mayor. "I just never thought it would work, and I also don't believe that camping in the city is the most humane way of treating the homeless."

Mr. Francesconi voted with the minority in August 2001, when the City Council voted to allow Dignity Village — then called Camp Dignity — to inhabit public land.

Still, Dignity Village has many loyal supporters here, including a particularly devoted Portland businessman, Lee Larson, a retired transportation company executive. Mr. Larson gave residents an old airport shuttle bus to use as a library; has paid the city \$40,000 covering their rent over the past two years; and is determined that Dignity Village not disband.

"It's really kind of the American dream," said Mr. Larson, 62, who heard about this group of homeless people when they were living under the Fremont Bridge and wondered how he could help. "You have homeless people pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps."

"I mean, they've done all this," he said during a visit to the village, pointing to the ramshackle structures, the windmill that provides electricity, their outdoor kitchen, the propane-heated showers, the portable toilets and the communal meeting area under a tarp, where couches are available for those without a tent or shack. "It's really neat, it's a neat thing."

Many at the encampment said they had no desire to abandon their dream now. They have survived too much — frequent police sweeps un-



Photographs by Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times

Tim McCarthy, treasurer of Dignity Village, in his home. Residents say village life is better than shelters, where they cannot store their possessions.

An urban tent village of 60 people face the loss of its lease with the city.

camp. Its residents describe it as a "self-governing urban village" and it is one of the nation's few government-sanctioned homesteads for the homeless. It rents land from the city of Portland, runs a nonprofit corporation, adopts an annual budget, has bylaws and an executive and a legislative branch of government and is working to create a court system.

But its permit for camping on city land is expiring, two years after city officials decided to rent an acre of public land for the encampment — a move that the Portland mayor, Vera Katz, acknowledged at the time might have sounded "absolutely crazy" when New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and other cities were cracking down on their homeless residents. The village is losing the support of some officials, who say it has overstayed its welcome. And the village's latest bid to buy a private lot and build portable houses made of straw and clay fell through in August.

Still, the villagers, many of whom met more than three years ago when they were living in tents on a stretch of mud under an Interstate highway bridge here, said they were undeterred. The consensus at the legislative session was that whatever happened, as long as they remained homeless, they would stay together.

"We have something," said Jack Tafari, 57, the chairman of the Digni-



Above, a meeting of the Dignity Village legislature. "We have something," said Jack Tafari, 57, right, the chairman of the Dignity Village Council. "It's a lot better than nothing, but we're going to have more."



der the bridge and confrontations with the City Council before the city finally legalized their new camp. There were Portland's relentless rains, continuing criticism of the village and political battles among the villagers. The ultimate goal, they said, is to create a workable model of self-sufficient villages for homeless people across the country.

Many had slept in shelters, in the streets or under the Fremont Bridge. They say that village life is better than sleeping on benches or in doorways or even in shelters, where they cannot store their possessions or keep pets, and where couples are split up.

Dignity Village requires those who live there to look for work or go to school, said Brenda Howard-Gray,

who as chairwoman of the tents and population committee works on "intake" of new residents at the committee meeting every Tuesday at 10 a.m. About 25 residents have full- or part-time jobs, and most villagers receive food stamps or other benefits.

Among the residents, some have mental illnesses or physical disabilities. Some are highly educated — there is a former nurse and an unemployed engineer — and only recently fell on hard times.

People with children are discouraged from living in the village. Drinking is not allowed. Breaking that rule, stealing, being violent or causing other problems can lead to banishment by the Village Council — for 24 hours, a week, 30 days or

permanently, depending on the seriousness of the offense.

Gaye Reyes, the villager who is proposing a Dignity Village court, said that as with any bureaucracy, moving proposals through the village government could take forever.

"You know, you wouldn't think so, but a lot of homeless people are Type A," said Ms. Reyes, who left her job in accounting a few years ago at the age of 50, became deeply depressed, lost her apartment and now uses a wheelchair. "They have very specific ideas, and so everything around here is a battle royale."

"The village isn't for everybody," she added. "If you want to lay around and suck on a bottle for the rest of your life, fine. But you can't do it

here." No matter what the city allows, residents said they would continue raising money to buy their own property. They have \$8,000 on a land fund, and several private donors, including Mr. Larson, have said they will contribute substantially more to a land purchase.

"I want to see this thing through," said Benjamin Howard, a member of the Village Council, who lost his job on an oil tanker last year and lives in Dignity Village with his wife, Ms. Howard-Gray, who is also the village secretary. "I want to see it thrive. I don't necessarily want to be a permanent village resident, but whether the village survives here or not, most of us want to be a part of the village."