

# Hiding in Plain Sight

## The Baldock Restoration Project

by Andrée Tremoulet, Ellen M. Bassett, and Allison Moe

On a winter night in 2010, 109 men, women and children slept at the Baldock Rest Area on I-5 south of Wilsonville, Oregon. Approximately one third of them had set up camp in back parking lots, away from the stream of visitors who stopped at the expansive rest area to take a break from driving. They were the chronically homeless, the self-named Baldockeans, the people whose lives revolved around the community at the Baldock. Some experienced physical or mental disabilities or addictions. The Baldock was their home, their refuge, their community.

The other two-thirds slept near parking area lights, where they felt safest. They were the “shadow people,” the transitionally homeless. Their lives had hit a bad patch—the loss of a job, major debt from medical costs, divorce, domestic violence—and they had found themselves without sufficient income to stay in their homes. They did not identify as being part of the alternative world of the homeless; instead, their goal was to remain part of traditional society and regain their former status. During the day, they hid their homeless state, leaving the Baldock to work or spend time in libraries and other public places.

*“The long-term resident population had formed a complex, self-regulating community . . .”*

The long-term resident population had formed a complex, self-regulating community, with shared meals, organized shopping expeditions and delineated roles and responsibilities. One man had called the Baldock home for 17 years, and St. Vincent de

Paul, a social services agency, had provided weekly hot meals there for several years.

Some of the features that made the Baldock an attractive area for visitors also made it attractive to people without a permanent place to live. Hot and cold running water, toilets, picnic tables, water fountains, shady groves of trees and plenty of space were important amenities to people with only a vehicle, tent or camper as a home. It also provided privacy, with three parking areas on each side of the highway. For some, the steady stream of visitors provided a remunerative panhandling opportunity, and a few may have engaged in a grey market in prostitution or drugs. Others travelled to work from the Baldock. The rest area is just 14 miles south of Portland, with its urban services, and even closer to Canby. A truck stop a few miles to the south had showers, laundry facilities, a small market, a gas station and a restaurant. In short, the combination of amenities, relative privacy and location made it an attractive place to live for those with

vehicles but no tradi



That winter, the lives of the people sleeping at the Baldock were about to change. On January 1, Oregon Travel Experience (called Oregon Travel Information Council at the time) had assumed management responsibilities for five rest areas in the state, including Baldock. In anticipation of this new role, in the fall OTE had organized a local business and public sector advisory committee to develop a vision for the Baldock Rest Area, and the group had expressed concerns about panhandling and other problems associated with the homeless community. On January 1, OTE was faced with the delicate decision of how to proceed.

OTE Executive Director Cheryl Gribskov chose hot chocolate.

## **Homelessness and Transportation Agencies**

Although the homeless community at the Baldock Rest Area was unusual in its duration and sophistication, homeless encampments or urban campgrounds commonly occur on public land. In a national survey of state transportation agencies conducted by Bassett, Tremoulet and Moe in 2011, 70% of respondents (representing 25 U.S. states and British Columbia) said that they encountered homeless encampments as part of their routine work. Any major public land owner with conveniently-located sites with some measure of privacy and shelter is a likely candidate for experiencing challenges with homeless individuals.

Upon learning of these research results, Emily Badger, a writer for *The Atlantic Cities*, commented, "This means that public agencies better equipped to run trains or pave highways must often act as the first responders to homelessness. It's a sad commentary on how we handle these populations—in a society that doesn't treat access to shelter as a right—that the task falls to the front-line employees of transportation agencies untrained to do anything like this."

## **Hot Chocolate**

OTE was not the first agency that had attempted to deal with the homeless encampment at the Baldock Rest Area. Round-the-clock stays were against rest area rules, and Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) had, upon several occasions, called Oregon State Police to clear the area. However, neither the state police nor ODOT had sufficient resources to remain at the rest area on an ongoing basis, and thus the Baldockeans gradually returned. This cycle was repeated several times, creating a culture of distrust between the residents and state police.

Instead of leading with an enforcement-only approach, OTE decided that the agency needed to have a better understanding of the situation before proceeding. On New Year's Day 2010, Executive Director Gribskov and a community volunteer showed

up at the rest area with hot chocolate

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to greet the residents, introduce themselves and listen to their concerns. Gribskov quickly realized that her agency alone could not solve the complex social, economic and political challenges underlying the presence of the Baldock community, so she sought help. She enlisted not just ODOT and Oregon State Police, but also state, county and local social service agencies, homeless advocates, local law enforcement, community leaders, and the county district attorney’s office.

At fortuitously-timed Problem-Oriented Policing workshop sponsored by the Clackamas County District Attorney’s Office, the basic strategy took shape in a committee comprised of social service and community justice representatives. The strategy involved intensive outreach and one-on-one assistance to provide opportunities to make changes that would enable them to move on from the Baldock to better living conditions. This was the “pull.” It also involved changing the conditions that enabled Baldockeans to stay where they were. This “push” included changing the rest area rules and developing new methods of enforcement.

*“The period of transition would have to be a carefully orchestrated ballet . . .”*

The period of transition would have to be a carefully orchestrated ballet of pushing and pulling, with the professional partners presenting a humane but united front. The strategy came together in February 2010; the partners set a goal of clearing the rest area and beginning a higher level of enforcement on May 1, before the seasonal influx of new residents. It was a tall order, and initially there were no

extra resources available to make it happen.

What made it happen was the personal commitment of the key partners involved: Ronell Warner of the Canby Center; Bill Stewart of the Clackamas County District Attorney's Office; Fred Testa and Dan Swift of Oregon State Police; Liz Bartell and Linda Fisher of Clackamas County Social Services; Karla Keller of Oregon Department of Transportation; Mary Carroll of Oregon Housing and Community Services; Amy Cleary and Cyndy Heisler of Clackamas County Domestic Resources Center and Cheryl Gribskov of Oregon Travel Experience. Eventually, a small amount of one-time-only funding –funds not available today– was found from state and county sources for enhanced case management, and local non-profits and donors chipped in with donations of cash and supplies.

### **Implementing a Push-Pull Approach**

On the pull side, social service agencies met with residents willing to accept assistance. They helped each person imagine and build a path to what they wanted for themselves. This could involve addressing old debts, obtaining a new social security card and identity papers to replace lost ones, taking responsibility for one's behavior to reunite with family, finding and accepting steady employment (no matter how hard), reinstating a commercial driver's license, enrolling in an in-patient substance abuse program, or any number of things. While the additional funds covered the costs of one-on-one case management, the pull partners creatively managed existing resources—classes, assessments—to bring services to the residents and tailor them to their needs.

The push-side partners developed new rules and enforcement procedures to dislodge the long-term community and ensure that a new one did not take its place. They tightened up Oregon Administrative Rules that governed behavior in rest areas and made failure to comply a Class B violation. The Clackamas County Community Court was poised to take on criminal cases if they arose and divert offenders to rehabilitative services as

an alternative to serving jail time, if warranted. OTE made plans to refurbish the rest area and staff it with both a site team and volunteers to promote its use as a visitor resource. They also allocated funds to pay for enhanced police patrols after the enforcement date of May 1 and through the rest of the summer to discourage visitors from staying more than the allowed 12 hours during a 24-hour period.

The professional partners soon discovered that implementing a push-pull approach also required forging new levels of trust among themselves—social service agencies and law enforcement do not always see eye-to-eye on matters involving both their professions—and with the Baldockeans, who, until this point, had had little reason to believe that anyone cared. The professionals learned to trust each other's judgment and be flexible about enforcing the rules. They came to have each other's back, to be attentive to each other's safety and to show up if needed. For the Baldockeans, trust meant believing that these people were sincere about both the opportunities and permanent change at the Baldock. They began to believe that this time was different.

### **Moving Day and Beyond**

Moving day, April 30th, 2010, was quite an event. The preceding 48 hours had involved a flurry of activity, with volunteer and paid mechanics working to get old vehicles road-worthy and the remaining Baldockeans packing their possessions. For those who had no other place to go immediately, the county had arranged temporary camping at a nearby state campground. Beyond that, they would do "in-and-out" at the Baldock, staying no more than 12 hours at a time, until a more permanent solution was found.

Moving day was not picture-perfect, but it was successful. A state trooper who had not been involved with the project showed up unexpectedly and began ticketing the Baldockeans. Chaos ensued, and trust built over months of hard work was nearly destroyed, until the situation was sorted out by other

state police who had been involved.

In the short term, half of the 20 people who had accepted county help found other places to camp, 30% did in-and-out at the Baldock, 10% found permanent housing, 5% went into detox and treatment, and 5% found other solutions. Approximately sixteen months later, half of them were in permanent housing and 15% were in transitional housing, waiting for a permanent spot to open up. Only 35% were in unstable living conditions. Given the circumstances, a long-term housing retention rate of 65% for this population is considered to be very good.

The Baldock is now a lovely, well-maintained visitor resource. The restored Grove of the States provides a walking path for those needing to stretch their legs. The back area sports a new solar array. While most who stop are there for just a short while, parking is also available for up to 12 hours a day to truck drivers and others (including former Baldockeans) who need a place to stop and sleep. There is no evidence of the long-standing community that once lived there.

### **Learning from the Baldock**

The economic, social and political choices made as a nation over the last decades have ensured that our country will have an ongoing population of homeless individuals. Local housing and social services networks are, in most cases, struggling to keep up with the demand for services. Thus, homelessness is a messy, complicated societal problem with many spill-over effects, some of which are likely to continue to affect the maintenance and operations of our shared public land.

Perhaps there is an opportunity for those with the land and those with the services to sit down together with representatives or advocates of people without permanent housing to develop new approaches that accommodate the ongoing and permanent reality of homelessness in our communities today. The Baldock Restoration Project is one such example of that occurring. The solution reached was humane displacement.



In some cases, more long-term arrangements have been reached. Dignity Village, a self-managed homeless community, has a lease with the City of Portland for Sunderland Yard near the Portland airport. Over the last ten years, tents have been slowly replaced with small structures which must meet basic building codes for camping structures. Dignity Village is guided by a set of democratically-created rules, including no drugs, alcohol, disruptive behavior or children (for the children's safety). Residents must participate in weekly village meetings and contribute time and labor to maintaining the community.

In Eugene and nearby communities, St. Vincent de Paul manages an overnight parking program for homeless people with vehicles. They work with faith communities, non-profits, local governments and businesses that volunteer sites. St. Vincent de Paul provides garbage disposal and portable rest rooms. In 2011, the program assisted 81 individual adults and 27 families with 41 children.

In King County, Washington, the self-managed Tent City 4 rotates from one location to the next every ninety days, so that no one community absorbs the impact permanently. It is associated with the non-profit SHARE/WHEEL. Currently, Tent City 4 is located in a church parking lot across from the police station in the prosperous town of Kirkland. Their self-imposed rules require that they be respectful neighbors, as they are often located in residential neighborhoods. Loitering outside the camp, parking nearby and loud noise are prohibited, as well as drugs and alcohol. They work with law enforcement to screen new community members.

Perhaps the ultimate challenge for collaboration was issued by a Federal Highway Administration official from the Midwest. At a January 2012 national transportation conference, where a case study of the Baldock Restoration Project was presented, he posed this question: What if transportation engineers started designing facilities such as overpasses or bridges to

accommodate the needs of homeless people instead of chasing them away? Perhaps the sites could be maintained by social service agencies or self-managed communities. That solution would certainly represent a new kind of thinking about how to respond to the issue and require a new level of collaboration and trust among public agencies and the people whom they serve.

There is little question that living in a car, camper or tent in make-shift accommodations is far from the perfect long-term solution to the nation's intransigent problem of homelessness. But it may be a practical and humane one that is hiding in plain sight.

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**Metroscape, Summer 2014**