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how shelters can benefit their own populations,” Kinnison says. “We receive so much positive feedback, especially from our tiny villages. I wish neighbors and communities knew that. It might change their negative opinions.”

KCRHA’s brief yet tumultuous history has led many to question its future. Harrell told the Business Journal he would like to see the other cities in King County – including Auburn, Kent, Renton, Bellevue and Redmond – kick in more funds to combat the problem. If not, he wanted to see it “drastically morph that energy to perhaps a policymaking board without direct services.”

“It can’t continue to work in this fashion,” Harrell says.

Money is at least part of the solution to the region’s homelessness crisis. Mayor-elect Katie Wilson says she would push for a reallocation of existing funds. She also acknowledged that additional shelters will cost money and floated the possibility of a city capital gains tax and a tax on vacant homes.

Plymouth Housing’s Karen Lee points to some aspects of the region’s approach that are working well, including the coordinated entry system. That system allows unhoused individuals to be matched with available shelter beds without having to go door-to-door seeking help.

Still, funding remains a major challenge, she says. Much of the region’s homelessness response depends on a dedicated fund tied to the county’s real estate document recording fee.

“The assumption was that real estate sales would always be gang-busters,” Lee says. “When sales slow down, the funding dries up as well.”

In Seattle, revenue from the JumpStart payroll tax was supposed to be dedicated to affordable housing, but much of it has been used to backfill the city’s general fund.

“We want 62% of JumpStart funding to go towards housing, but it is almost always less,” Lee says.

She added that she believes one of the keys to addressing homelessness is to aggressively invest in housing, pointing to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as a model.

“Nationally, veterans’ homelessness is at the lowest level it’s been since the agency began measuring it



2022

Above: Tents line the curbside on the sidewalk at Columbia Street and Fourth Avenue in downtown Seattle.

2020

Top right: The grounds of Albert Davis Park in Northeast Seattle, including the children’s playground, are occupied by dozens of people in tents.

2017

Bottom right: A person sleeps huddled under wool blankets in the doorway of an unoccupied commercial space along Yesler Way in Pioneer Square.

in 2009,” she says. “The VA aggressively funded its homelessness programs. They focused on harm reduction, housing first, rental support and health care – the same approach we’re trying to take here. But the VA really funded it.”

According to Veterans Affairs data, the agency’s budget for homelessness programs in fiscal year 2025 is \$3.2 billion – a sharp increase from \$713 million in fiscal year 2010. During the initiative “Ending Veteran Homelessness,” the rate of homelessness among veterans dropped by 55% in 2022 compared to its peak in 2010.

“Money and the appropriate funding would solve a lot of prob-

lems,” Lee says. “That would be the first step.”

That aggressive funding approach could work at the state and local levels, Lee says. Still, she notes, even with more money, there are legal and regulatory barriers that can delay shelter and housing projects.

Plymouth’s Redmond Permanent Supportive Housing project, for example, was delayed for several months after community members sued the city of Redmond for granting the nonprofit a parking reduction waiver.

“We were supposed to break ground in May but weren’t able to until September,” Lee says. “But

from what we’re seeing on the East-side, most people support the idea of having permanent supportive housing.”

‘It was very appropriate to call it an emergency’

Since 2022, the city’s investment has created, preserved or funded more than 8,000 affordable rental homes, according to Seattle’s Office of Housing. That includes more than 1,000 units of permanent supportive housing. Meanwhile, the number of fentanyl overdoses dropped by 33% between 2023 and 2024, according to data from the Seattle Police Department.

\$1B

Amount Seattle has spent on homelessness over the last decade

Harrell’s 2025 homelessness response budget totaled \$191 million, with \$121.8 million directed toward shelter and related services such as emergency shelters, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, homelessness prevention and support services offered through permanent supportive housing.

The proposed 2026 budget would increase homelessness response funding by 17.8% to \$225 million. The plan includes \$7.8 million in initial funding for 155 new shelter beds with wraparound supportive services such as case workers and housing navigation. The funds would serve people with complex



needs, including behavioral health and substance-use challenges. The investment builds on the 2025 shelter improvements, which included 100 new tiny houses and the opening of the Stability Through Access and Resources Center earlier this year.

Despite the added funding and new policies, Harrell says the state of emergency is still warranted.

“The way I look at it, it was very appropriate to call it an emergency 10 years ago,” he says. “But compared to other crises—like the HIV crisis and the Covid pandemic—this is a different beast. We are talking about 400 years of institutional racism. The issue of homelessness is not an emer-

gency in the traditional sense. It will take years to fix, but I believe we are addressing it accordingly.”

Ending the state of emergency, he says, would send the wrong message.

Balducci says regional leaders knows how to tackle the problem – it just needs to happen on a larger scale. She agrees with city and county leaders’ decision to declare a state of emergency 10 years ago, because it helped draw attention to the crisis.

“It’s a long-term problem that requires a long-term commitment,” she says. “I believe if we continue on the path we’re on, we’ll find ourselves in a much better place in the next 10 to 20 years.”