Floating Hostels to the Rescue - for Homeless Too

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
09 November 2010

I was discussing with a salty old colleague the possibilities of Sail Transport Network here in Portland, Oregon. It's not the perfect environment for all-wind power, but there are ways of greatly reducing petroleum for trade and transport over land and water now, before petrocollapse. One idea that relates to sail power and community-building is to help the homeless population while enhancing the whole public good.

Women's shelters here have a waiting list of two months, while the town's famous cold rainy season sets in. Men have a longer wait.

The idea came as I reminisced with my sailing friend over coffee (not sail-transported, alas) about my time on a floating youth hostel in Stockholm, Sweden in 1974. There the beautiful, huge old sailing ship af Chapman had a dormitory for the female guests and another for the males. The location was convenient at downtown parks.

I was fortunate to meet a fellow hosteler in the lovely Ulrike, a sweet blonde woman from Germany. After spending a few laid-back hours seeing the sights with a couple of other new friends, another German girl and an Italian youth, Ulrike and I went to a downtown hotel for the afternoon -- good, no doubt, for the local economy; the ship hostel ought not to drain the hotel trade.

In waterfront cities such as Portland, a collaboration can be easily created between Sail Transport Network (or any community-minded boating activists), with a local nonprofit social services organization. Their purpose would be to have sailboats or even motorized barges or houseboats hosted at public docks (see photo below).

Homeless people and even hostelers could stay at such facilities. When a particular city dock might be busy or full, and has to be available for a visiting sailboat approaching, the "Floating Hostel Home" could float away from the dock and drop its anchor or tie up to a nearby buoy mooring for a few hours or a day. It would still be able to pull back up to the dock in order to let hostelers/homeless on and off the floating home. Portland's public docks are little used, and there is ample room.

As for bathroom facilities, some docks may already have them nearby, or are not too far away to walk to. More bathrooms with showers could be built. On the boats or barges there can be composting toilets, showers,kitchens, libraries, information on city facilities and transit service, job/ride boards, counselors, etc. Control on drinking and smoking can be attained by allowing these activities only on one limited part of the deck. Such activities will happen anywhere and everywhere, including apartment houses which can catch on fire, like a boat or suburban house can.

Aside from one's being able to enjoy the convenience of visiting or staying at such a floating hostel, the benefits to the public could include the moneyless "charge" to, or "rent payment" by, the residents: work trade. The city or counties could accept community service for many activities such as environmental clean up: collecting plastic debris, restoring river banks to ecological and anti-erosion health, and even reporting vehicles to the City for crankcase and other leaks that poison the river.

Another benefit to the public is to not have to helplessly witness the miserable conditions for people currently sleeping under bridges and breathing exhaust fumes, tire dust and brake dust, in unsafe social conditions and in cold, wet

weather. The health of today's men, women and children without homes, who would love and appreciate a floating home with facilities, is something for all of us to care about. We are all affected when someone is unfortunate or harmed, or when streets become confrontation zones between street people and police. Public health and health care have to include everyone, even the "losers" in the competitive "American Dream." On each floating hostel can be a small health desk with a first aid kit, oxygen tank, soap for sale, etc.

Staffing for the floating hostels could be mostly volunteer, from the people living aboard. Security and other duties such as cleaning or repairs can either be accomplished by residents or staffing from an affiliated organization. Senior management could be an established nonprofit, certified organization that can accept public, governmental and private funding, The floating hostels need not be government run, but rather semi-autonomously run, obeying all laws just like everybody else.

The health of the river and its creatures is not what it should be. Anyone staying on or visiting a floating home could learn about ecology and conservation from literature and talks on board and at public docks' displays. Valet bike parking, or a secure bike storage area, could be set up at or near the public dock, with bike carts available. Farmers markets offering river-shipped/sailed goods could occur regularly at or near the public docks.

Portland not only has rivers, public docks and one of the best bicycling infrastructures and movements in North America; it was the first city to pass a resolution recognizing peak oil. Its Peak Oil Task Force report recognized how far Portland had to go to be ready for the end of plentiful, affordable oil, and to become more efficient in order to contribute less pollution. Portland is only slightly better off and more progressive than almost all other industrialized cities now obtaining food from huge distances. Right below the calm surface is the global threat to transportation-fuel supplies: our relative comfort and convenience can disappear overnight when a geopolitical event next impacts the world oil market. So any effort on the water to link the overall community and foster more efficient transport, and awareness of local economic issues, helps a city and region cope with peak oil.

Where else in the world are floating hostels? New Zealand, The Maldives, Serbia (Belgrade on the Danube), Berlin, and in Indonesia. There are floating hotels too, such as the fancy Floating Hotel in Stockholm. As for floating homeless shelters, the only evidence for them is a couple of U.S. cities' having toyed with the idea of old Navy ships for such a purpose. Countries outside the U.S. don't have a homeless problem for a significant portion of the population -- notwithstanding shantytowns in the Third World -- unless there is an acute crisis involving refugees.

Instead of wringing our hands and hoping the banksters will start up job-generating businesses, we can take care of our local citizens and help our local economy. We can go this route, or wait for the Feds to step in to deal with crowd control á la New Orleans Superdomes and formaldehyde-trailer home "solutions."

The concept of floating hostels to especially serve the homeless might appeal to you, yes You, some day, should you need a roof over your head with dignity and community. You might even find a job refurbishing a boat or remodeling a barge or house boat for this project. And you might run into Ulrike or any children she probably has had! Her name means "Mistress of all." This is resonant with Gaia, no? This floating hostel project could be called Ulrike, and wherever she is, she would be honored! Ja, meine Liebe?

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The Red Boat floating Swedish hostel -- scroll down two-thirds of page of stockholmtown.blogg.se

Learn about the Sail Transport Network

Latest background on Portland's homeless population from a homeless advocate reporting to Culture Change:

"The State of Oregon has just published its 5-year policy plan for the Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Business Development Department and Oregon Housing and Community Services. The State reports the rate of homelessness in Oregon increased by 12% from 2008 to 2010 with a total of 19,207 persons counted as homeless as of January, 2010. Of this population only 31% were able to receive shelter or transitional housing while a whopping 69% were turned away for services or located only by a street count. According to the State, "The unknowns of the recession and the uncertainties of the present day economic climate make planning and prognostication a very uneasy exercise. Oregon looks to the next five years as a period of turmoil and transition." In order to understand what this means within the City of Portland, I spoke with representatives from Transitions Project in Portland this week. They informed me that the waiting time for a shelter bed serving women this winter is approximately two months."

“Descending the Oil Peak: Navigating the Transition from Oil and Natural Gas” report and website for the Portland Peak Oil Task Force

The active Portland Peak Oil citizens group

Sisters of the Road long-time homeless advocacy and assistance, and Sisters of the Road Cafe, Portland, Ore.

Creative uses of rivers: Science Barges for Portland, from Sail Transport Network volunteer Jeff Holiman:

Science barge: floating watershed science/ educational center that generates its own power and converts sunlight into food while consuming nearby organic waste. This platform filters water, demonstrates aquaculture, bioreactors and compost, hydroponics, mycoremediation, nutrient cycling, phytoremediation, self-replicating riparian restoration pods, water and sediment laboratory, GIS clearninghouse, grows products for local markets and can serve as a venue for special events, cob oven, greenhouse, rocket-stove, natural building techniques, etc.