

# The Lifebridge/Harborlight Plan: Is it Good for Salem?

**A**t the recent City Council hearing about the proposed encampment ordinance, it became clear that the City is increasingly relying on Lifebridge North Shore to solve the problem of homelessness in the community. Salem residents may not yet realize the implications for their future.

We all know Lifebridge, with its homeless shelter on Riley Plaza and large thrift shop on Canal Street. But not many know that Lifebridge has teamed up with Harborlight Homes, a nonprofit housing developer, to propose a large new complex that will radically expand their presence in downtown Salem and change our city forever.

What's the plan? It would include demolishing the existing shelter and adjacent structures and building a significantly larger Lifebridge shelter complex plus Harborlight studio apartments for unhoused individuals. Lifebridge's offices and the thrift shop would also move here.

The project would expand Lifebridge's footprint to include the entire Margin Street block — including the historic St Mary's Italian Church — and would extend around the corner onto side streets. It would also expand upward, from the current 2 stories to 4 stories, and possibly 5 in some sections.

**But we need to help the unhoused.** Absolutely. Homelessness is a tragedy, and it's on the rise — not just here, but worldwide. It's also a complex problem that cannot be solved simply by increasing the size of facilities.

We've taken a closer look. Here's what we found.

**Their project is based on an outdated approach.** Concentrating unhoused people in one

location (known as “warehousing”) is an institutionalized model that makes it even harder for them to escape the cycles that lead to continued homelessness and stigmatizes the residents by harnessing them with an address known to future employers and landlords. Newer approaches — adopted internationally and endorsed by the federal government — focus on decentralized housing and services. The idea is to have more facilities but smaller ones, essentially multi-unit houses that are truly integrated into their respective neighborhoods. An even newer tactic works with landlords to provide housing in existing rental buildings. These approaches yield success rates that are significantly higher and longer-lasting.

**Lifebridge's record at providing services is already troubling.** The staffing problems run deep: too few caseworkers, inadequate training, high turnover. Those in need of services simply don't have access to the help they require. The argument for warehousing relies on the reduction of staff in the name of efficiency. Instead, staff become overwhelmed and rely on city police and services for help.

**Many unhoused people will be excluded.** Lifebridge attracts unhoused individuals to Salem but then excludes certain people regardless of level of need. If you have a pet or a partner, you're automatically ineligible. Lifebridge also frequently expels clients for a range of reasons — some reasonable, some arbitrary and capricious — returning them to the streets with no alternatives. Others may take meals from Lifebridge but find the shelter presents trade-offs they are unwilling to accept, such as loss of personal freedom and personal safety, particularly with respect to theft

and assault. It then becomes the City's responsibility to find shelter for these individuals and their property.

**This project will make Salem the homeless shelter center for the North Shore.** Only three other communities on the North Shore offer permanent overnight adult shelter beds: Beverly (14 beds), Gloucester (16 beds), and Lynn (44 beds, even though it is more than twice Salem's population). With this project, Salem would provide 76 beds — more than the other three combined (at a total of 74). This number does not include the 50 "emergency" beds recently added to the Canal Street thrift shop building — which would push the total to 126 beds in Salem. Even Peabody, our second-largest city, provides beds only for extreme weather events. As a result, Salem will become the referral center for regional police departments and service agencies.

**The project will overwhelm its surrounding neighborhood.** The height and sheer size of the development completely disrespect the Greater Endicott Street community, a working-class, mostly first-and-second-generation immigrant neighborhood. It's not just environmental effects like blocking light and views, and traffic and parking, or the familiar problem of overnight campers in our backyards. The project eliminates significant elements of our immigrant history.

**The need will expand.** Centralized housing and services will attract even more unhoused individuals — not only from the North Shore but also from Boston and beyond. Salem has already attracted former residents of Boston's Mass/Cass encampment. As a North Shore police officer told us, "10 more beds will bring 40 more people looking for them." Even Lifebridge executive director Jason Etheridge recently told *The Boston Globe*, "But I'm not convinced if we find a solution for the 30 folks [at the encampment] it won't be filled in by another 30 people."

**The project represents a threat to Salem's economy.** Salem's tourism industry is uniquely vulnerable to the experiences of individual visitors — just ask

San Francisco. The centralized shelter model means more unhoused people on the streets. As other tourist cities have discovered, an economic "doom loop" can result: decreasing tax bases combined with increasing need for services.

**Bottom line: the proposed project is not a win for anyone.** Not the City, not the businesses, not the neighborhood, not the residents, not the visitors. Who loses most with this plan? The unhoused. The proposal locks them into a discredited service model that all but guarantees an extended cycle of life on the streets.

### **We can do better.**

For this to happen, we need City leadership to become proactive, to work with the state to commit to a different vision: the creation of an interconnected, decentralized network of smaller shelters and housing units in *all* of the North Shore communities — even those where Lifebridge and Harborlight board members live.

We are Salem residents who want to see this city be the best it can be. Are we NIMBYs? No. Lifebridge is already in our back yard, and has been for 20 years. It hasn't always been easy. But many of us know and have befriended Lifebridge clients. We help when we can. And we listen. It's time for City leadership to listen, too.

— **Joe Cultrera**

Chair,

Our Neighborhood, Our History,  
a committee of the

Greater Endicott Street Neighborhood Association

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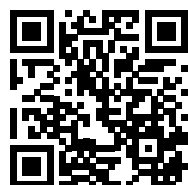
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