

Street Roots Breakfast
October 9, 2014
Commissioner Fish Remarks

I ran for office because I wanted to fix a broken housing system.

And I was honored to serve as Housing Commissioner with many of the people in this room.

There were some bumps in the road, to be sure.

The Great Recession, record foreclosures, a rising tide of need, an honest and charged debate about race and inequality.

Thankfully, there's a lot **less** drama in my new assignments: running our utilities!

Except for some kid peeing in a reservoir, fighting and defeating a polluter-backed ballot measure, and issuing boil water notices.

There's not much to it.

...

Today, I have been asked to tell the story of *Street Roots*.

And what a story.

Of perseverance. Award-winning journalism. An innovative business model.

A righteous fight for social justice and change.

...

There are two recurring questions woven through their story:

- **What kind of community do we want to be?**
- **And do we have the will to get there?**

...

The story of *Street Roots* begins with a powerful metaphor:

The idea of roots.

- The roots that remind us where we came from.

And

- The roots that sustain us and help us grow.

We know that a house cannot stand without a strong foundation.

We also know that a movement for change cannot succeed without core values, a clear vision, and strong leadership.

That's where *Street Roots* enters the story, stage left.

For 15 years, *Street Roots* has been:

Advocating.

Challenging.

Inspiring.

Can you imagine Portland without *Street Roots*?

Does anyone doubt that our approach to ending homelessness is more humane and more real because of *Street Roots*?

...

Against all odds, *Street Roots* is a success story.

In 1999, the newspaper began, humbly as a volunteer-project with just 5 vendors.

Now every two weeks, 90 vendors sell 15,000 copies of *Street Roots* across our community.

And by the end of the year, *Street Roots* plans to go weekly, **more than doubling** the number of copies sold.

At a time when print journalism is in decline...

When other newspapers are shrinking, struggling to find their audience, and losing their way, *Street Roots* has stuck to their roots, and have become our North Star at a time of great uncertainty.

So why buy *Street Roots* when you can pick up most newspapers for free?

It starts with award-winning journalism.

I'm not too familiar with the North American Street Newspaper Association awards, but *Street Roots* sure wins a lot of them.

And I know what I like:

- Probing interviews – from community leaders to the NBA Rookie of the Year.
- Book reviews, Vendor poetry and artwork.

- Investigative journalism, powerful enough to move the moral compass.

Who can forget Amanda Waldroupe's story about George Grigorieff, the veteran who froze to death at Lone Fir Cemetery during the winter storm of 2008?

Or Tye Doudy's 6-part series chronicling his struggle with addiction while living on the streets.

And then there are the editorials, regularly pushing local elected to go further and be bolder.

And just to prove what good sports they are, many of them are here today, sponsoring tables!

...

But the real secret to the *Street Roots* success story is the vendors, and the power of an innovative business model, to build community and to demolish stereotypes.

Through its vendor program, *Street Roots* gives voice to the voiceless, establishes personal connections, and creates opportunity.

When Portlanders buy *Street Roots*, they are meeting another human being, and sharing their stories.

Vendors are:

Veterans

Parents

Poets

Writers

and
Artists

They have names:

William Adams
Sherri Banning
Marlan Crump
Willie Bradford
Earl Bennett...

I'd like to acknowledge 2 vendors who are joining us this morning.

One is a fixture at Peet's on NE Broadway, and won the National Vendor Community Award last year.

The other is the newspaper's poet laureate, who reaches new audiences at Whole Foods in Hollywood.

Both are my friends:

Raymond Thornton
Leo Rhodes

Please stand

...

The story of *Street Roots* is still unfolding, and we will help to write it.

These are challenging times in the struggle to end homelessness, and to build a more compassionate and just society.

After a generation of effective advocacy and a decade of progress under a visionary ten- year plan, we have much to celebrate, and we know what works.

Yet despite our progress, there are still too many children, families, and adults *living* and *dying* on our streets.

There's a growing backlash against people experiencing homelessness, and frankly, we are often our own worst enemies.

...

So where do we go from here?

Back to *Street Roots*, and the question on the table:

What kind of community do we want to be?

- Are we committed to continuing to be a national leader in the fight to end homelessness?
- Do we still believe in long-term, cost-effective solutions, and are we willing to invest in them?
- Will we refuse to accept the barriers that still prevent too many in our community from reaching their full potential?
- Do we have the will and the courage to tackle the persistent problems of inequality and poverty?

...

There are no easy answers to these questions.

But as long as the leaders in this room continue to link arms and work together...

As long as we continue to serve with humility, compassion, and with a sense of moral indignation...

And as long as Israel and Joanne are publishing *Street Roots*...

I remain hopeful.

Thank you.