

The Oregonian

Portland could expand low-income utility discounts -- but will it?

By Brad Schmidt

October 7, 2015

The city of Portland could expand utility discounts to thousands of low-income renters who are currently ineligible, according to a long-delayed report released this week by the Portland Water Bureau.

The report reiterates what an expert panel determined at a meeting six months ago.

It's not clear if discounts will be expanded.

Earlier this year, Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the utility bureaus, asked a work group to study solutions to a problem that officials failed to address for about 20 years.

The city extends discounts only to about 8,400 customers who directly pay a combined water and sewer bill.

But an estimated 40,000 households are estimated to qualify based on income. Many of those are low-income renters.

Fish's work group determined in April that officials could extend discounts to apartments that cater exclusively to low-income residents. That would benefit an estimated 13,000 low-income renters who are currently ineligible because utilities are factored into their rent payments.

But increasing discounts to more customers would require rate increases, spending cuts or a new source of funding, perhaps from the city's general fund.

"The challenge now passes to the City to delve deeper into the issues identified and increase the number of low-income Portland residents receiving a discount on their City utility bill," the report reads.

Officials completed a draft report June 8. That report was supposed to be finalized and publicly released in June, Jaymee Cuti, a spokeswoman for the Water Bureau, told The Oregonian/OregonLive in June.

In July, Cuti said the report would be finished in August.

"The Commissioner plans to ask the new (Portland Utility Board) to review the report when it begins its work in September," she wrote in an email. "He is setting the deadline for the report for the end of August to allow sufficient time to review and refinement."

The utility board met twice in September but did not discuss the report. It wasn't finished.

The Oregonian formally requested the report Sept. 22.

Officials finished it Oct. 5 and shared it with the utility board Tuesday. It was publicly released Wednesday.

Over several months of delays, "the report was revised for clarity and to incorporate input from work group members," Garbriel Solmer, a Water Bureau spokeswoman, wrote in an email.

As to whether the discounts will happen?

The report recommends more study.

Portland approves housing emergency plan, what comes next is unclear

By Andrew Theen

October 7, 2015

Portland is officially in a housing emergency. But what that actually means for the city's more than 1,800 people living on the street is still unclear.

The Portland City Council voted unanimously Wednesday to approve the emergency declaration, which allows leaders to waive city code to allow temporary emergency homeless shelters, to open day-storage areas, and to use city properties to address a growing crisis.

"These people are our neighbors and we must do better," said Mayor Charlie Hales.

One week after Multnomah County and city leaders vowed to spend \$30 million on homelessness, and two weeks after Hales announced a surprise plan to tackle the issue by opening a women's shelter, there are many unanswered questions.

"Let's acknowledge that this vote in and of itself solves nothing," Commissioner Nick Fish said Wednesday, adding that he wholeheartedly supports the plan but said it merely gives the city "flexibility" to address the crisis.

Commissioner Amanda Fritz said Portland doesn't know where's its \$20 million share of the homelessness pledge will come from. "It's very much a matter of not only, 'What are we going to do?'" she said before voting, "But 'How are we going to pay for it?'"

Josh Alpert, Hales' chief of staff who worked on the strategy, said Portland should be able to do more for the homeless, and faster. "There is no model to follow," he said, "No playbook."

Portland hopes that whatever it does becomes a model.

Officials spent a lot of time Wednesday discussing options down the road.

Hales said the city needs to be "nimble and flexible." Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Housing Bureau, said he would propose new fees on developers to help pay for housing, and offer incentives for projects that include affordable housing. He said the city has 1,100 new affordable housing units in the pipeline and would soon decide on funding for an additional 600.

Fish said he supports increasing the urban renewal money set aside for affordable housing from 30 percent to 50 percent.

Alpert and Marc Jolin, the initiatives director for A Home for Everyone, the Multnomah County and city-backed housing venture, offered details on the emergency plan. Jolin said it would provide 650 shelter spaces for women and people with disabilities, and help 1,000 avoid eviction.

"The lack of affordable vacancies has made finding housing an almost insurmountable challenge," Jolin said.

The City Council also held a public hearing Wednesday on proposed rules to strengthen renters' rights, including a proposal to require landlords to give tenants 90 days' notice, not 30 or 60 depending on longevity, for no-cause evictions.

Justin Buri, executive director for the Community Alliance of Tenants, gave a fiery speech calling for more political leadership to protect renters. "Tenants are tired of being silenced out of fear, retribution or a bad reference from our landlords," he said.

Dozens of tenant advocates and residents told of escalating rents, eviction notices and uncertain futures. "If I have to leave Portland because I can't afford to rent here, then what about everybody else?" said Margot Black, who said she's a married mother whose household is around the median family income.

Landlord advocates such as lobbyist Cindy Robert said Portland's skyrocketing rents are a product of supply and demand. "Changing the rules on landlords does not lead to more housing," Robert said.

Robert said 30-day no-cause evictions protect good renters from nuisance neighbors. "To neighbors of bad actors, [30 days] seems like an eternity," she said.

The City Council would also require a 90-day notice if rents are raised 5 percent or more within one year. Saltzman was the lone City Council member to vote against that amendment, instead favoring a 10 percent threshold.

In the weeks since Hales' abrupt announcement, officials have been walking back statements and clarifying goals.

Hales had declared that the city would get all homeless women off the street by the end of 2015. Now, Alpert said, the goal is to do it "as fast as we can."

"The mayor likes to be aggressive in goal-setting," Alpert said. "Whether or not we will actually get to house or shelter every single woman who is currently on the street by the end of the year, I don't know. But that's a goal we should be aiming for."

The mayor's office also clarified details on its goal to cut homelessness in half.

Officials will measure their success in fighting homelessness against the 2015 figure of 3,801 — which includes 1,887 with no shelter, 872 in temporary shelter and 1,042 in transitional housing. The goal will be to cut the total to 1,900 within three years, Alpert said.

But it's not clear when they'll be able to track progress.

Officials generally do a one-night count of homeless residents every two years, with tallies scheduled for 2017 and 2019. Alpert said officials are considering annual counts.

The Portland Tribune

Council declares "housing emergency"

*By Jim Redden
October 7, 2015*

The City Council officially declared a "housing emergency" Wednesday, even though most members admitted they didn't know exactly what they would do in coming months to address it.

"There is obviously an emergency, but we've just started to discuss where to find the money to solve it," Commissioner Amanda Fritz said when voting to support the declaration submitted by Mayor Charlie Hales.

The vote was unanimous. Hales said it was a necessary first step to acting quickly to address the increasing numbers of homeless people and renters being forced out by no-fault evictions and renter increases.

The vote followed hours of testimony from renters who said they were being priced out of the homes and landlords who said they were only responding to increased demand from thousands of new people moving to Portland as the economy recovers.

The declaration suspends some regulations on the siting of homeless shelters and the construction of affordable housing projects, although no specific proposals were made during the hearing.

Police union calls for City Council to hire more officers

*By Jim Redden
October 7, 2015*

The union representing rank and file Portland police officers wants city residents to press the City Council to hire more officers.

The Portland Police Association has launched a public relations campaign called "Having Enough Police Matters" that includes an online petition and billboards in various parts of the city intended to convey the message the Portland Police Bureau is understaffed.

"Inadequate staffing in the Police Bureau is hurting our communities and putting all of us at risk. Nothing is more basic to the livability of a city than public safety. We need City Council to take immediate action to fix this critical staffing shortage. Our city and our officers deserve better," says PPA President Daryl Turner, a Portland police sergeant.

Mayor Charlie Hales admits there are current and upcoming vacancies in the bureau that need to be filled. Hales, who is in charge of the bureau, says steps are being taken to accelerate the hiring of new officers, according to his spokeswoman, Sara Hottman.

According to Hottman, the bureau currently has 35 vacant sworn positions and 41 more sworn members are projected to leave this fiscal year through retirements and resignations.

"Mayor Hales says clearly there is an urgent need. These positions have been budgeted for more than a year; retirements have been more frequent, and with police agencies nationwide hiring, recruiting has been more competitive. In response, Mayor Hales authorized the hiring of 11 new background investigators to accelerate the hiring process, and has been recruiting new police officers at every possible turn. Additionally, Chief [Larry] O'Dea and a new personnel director Vincent Woods are taking a new approach to address long-term hiring needs," Hottman said in an email to the Portland Tribune.

"The background investigators are going through the hiring process now, and should be active at the beginning of the year. Mayor Hales encourages people to visit JoinPortlandPolice.com for information on applying," Hottman continued.

According to Turner, the bureau does not currently have enough officers to respond to calls for service, investigating and solving crimes, address the deadly upswing in gun and gang violence, serve those who are impacted by livability issues surrounding homelessness,

assist citizens with mental illness and those suffering mental health crises; engage in community policing; and ensure the safety of Portland citizens and officers.

"Yet, police bureau staffing levels are dwindling even as our city continues to grow. Officers are forced to do more with less, and the community pays the price. In fact, the police bureau is around 700 hundred officers short of national staffing benchmarks," says Turner, referring to an FBI recommendation.

The police bureau has lost 190 positions since 2001, according to city personnel figures recently obtained by the Portland Tribune through a public records request. An earlier Portland Tribune story on the issue can be read at www.pamplinmedia.com/pt/9-news/265871-138823-citys-thin-blue-line-is-getting-thinner.

The PPA campaign includes a website with a petition at OurCityOurPolice.org.

The Portland Mercury

City Council Passed an Ordinance Declaring an Official Housing Emergency in Portland

By Shelby R. King

October 7, 2015

Portland City Council today passed an ordinance declaring an official housing emergency in the city.

The commissioners unanimously voted to enact an ordinance that will temporarily remove barriers to increasing affordable housing and address Portland's homelessness problem. The emergency declaration also authorizes a proposed request to Governor Kate Brown to officially declare a state of emergency.

"The tools we have now are not adequate," says Mayor Charlie Hales. "We need to be more nimble, more flexible, and swifter in our response."

The declaration allows the city to temporarily use existing buildings (Hales has looked into using an old Army Reserve building) as shelters. The ordinance also allows the city to fund a pilot program to establish day storage facilities where the homeless population can safely store their belongings. This would hopefully reduce the need for unauthorized homeless camps.

Next week, Housing Commissioner Dan Saltzman will propose a set of protections for renters, including extending the amount of notice—from either 30 to 60 days to 90 days—a landlord has to give tenants when either serving a no-cause eviction or increasing rent by more than 10 percent. Commissioner Amanda Fritz proposed an amendment changing the amount to 5 percent; it passed 4-1, with Saltzman voting against.

Fritz also proposed an amendment to further extend the notice period to 120 days, but was met with opposition because Saltzman and the city's attorneys both expressed concern that 120 days could be considered rent control—which is currently banned under state law—and would incite lawsuits from groups representing landlords and realtors.

"I asked the city attorneys and found that Oregon law really allows local governments to only go so far," Saltzman says. "I believe this not a panacea, but we must fast track these."

Saltzman is proposing that some of the \$30 million Hales and Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury committed to spending on new shelter space for hundreds of homeless and affordable housing for more than 1,000 people be earmarked to create a "legal services tenant protection team" to help enforce renters' rights.

The housing emergency declaration is active for one year and allow City Council to extent the declaration on a six month basis.

Justin Buri, Executive Director of the Community Alliance of Tenants (CAT), in September declared a "renters state of emergency" and asked council to impose a one year moratorium on all no-cause evictions. CAT also requested extending the notice period for any rent increase above 5 percent to one year. Right now landlords must only give 30 days notice when increasing rates.

Buri gave an impassioned speech, and received several loud rounds of applause from the audience, which packed council chambers.

"How many affordable apartment are there in your neighborhood?" Buri asked commissioners. "How long would it take you to move? Now imagine you had bad credit ... Imagine if you had a criminal record?"

Deborah Imse, Executive Director of Multifamily Northwest (MFNW)—an organization that represents the rental housing industry—testified that the problem comes from "years of under building" during the recession and says the answer is to give developers incentives to build more units.

"We can count the number of cranes in the air right now, building more luxury apartments, but how many of those new apartments will be affordable to low income, or even middle income, tenants?" Buri testified. "When are we going to recognize that building only market rate, luxury

apartments, will never trickle down to lower income tenants, no matter how many we build, despite all the zoning changes, cash incentives, and sweetheart deals we offer to developers?"

Following the invited testimony, dozens of citizens testified to city council—many of them shaky, emotional voices—telling commissioners about no-cause evictions and exorbitant rent increases. Testimony went on for several hours prior to council passing the amendment to city code that allows declaration of the state of emergency and a separate vote passing an ordinance declaring a state of emergency. Both votes were unanimous. The council will revisit the proposed renters' protections next week.

GoLocalPDX

City Council Passes Housing State of Emergency

By GoLocalPDX staff

October 8, 2015

On Wednesday, the Portland City Council passed an ordinance declaring a state of emergency regarding an increasingly desperate housing situation in the city.

The Council voted unanimously to declare a state of emergency weeks after Mayor Charlie Hales asked the Council to act on the growing number of homeless people in Portland. Last week, Hales announced a \$30 million investment in A Home for Everyone, a homeless shelter maintained by the City of Portland and Multnomah County.

"These people are our neighbors, and we must do better," Hales said.

In a departure from typical state of emergency rules, the housing state of emergency will last one year, rather than just two weeks, and can be extended by the Council. The state of emergency allows the city to waive city code to allow temporary emergency homeless shelters, to open day-storage areas, and to use city properties as homeless shelters.