

The Oregonian

Portland voters should get say on public campaign finance revival: Editorial Agenda 2016

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

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Portland City Commissioner Amanda Fritz's proposal to enact a public campaign financing program feels like déjà vu. It was just six years ago that voters killed off the last version of the city's taxpayer-funded financing experiment. Portland's "voter-owned elections," as the program was called, had produced two successful candidates, one scandal and several also-rans in return for \$2 million in city campaign contributions and overhead costs.

But Fritz, who successfully rode the program to a seat on the City Council, is determined to bring a version of the program back for Council approval this year. She contends it's a way to rebuild voter trust in government, swell the ranks of female and minority candidates and fix the perception that big donations influence politicians.

"I believe that one of the core problems in our society is that we don't trust our government," Fritz told The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board. "And this is an essential component to me of restoring that trust."

It's debatable that reinstituting a public campaign financing program will achieve the objectives that Fritz has outlined. For example, women and people of color have successfully won seats on the Multnomah County Commission without the kind of public finance program or contribution limits that Fritz is contemplating. But there's a more fundamental barrier to rebuilding trust that Fritz herself is pushing: She doesn't plan to put the matter up for a vote by Portlanders.

The amount of money at stake — about \$1.2 million a year — may seem insignificant in a city with \$500 million in general fund spending. But considering that voters rejected the program the last time they were asked, referring the matter to voters should be an important component of Fritz's goal to rebuild their trust.

Fritz contends that asking voters is unnecessary. She said the 2010 vote that killed the program was decided by a slim margin of 1,600 votes. And she's concerned that "big money" could sway the vote on this very topic. She also told The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board it's likely that the timing of the vote, during the recession when everyone was looking to harvest money for critical programs, played a hand in defeating the program.

But that ignores that even now, when the city has record revenue, public priorities are going unmet. Thousands of people are homeless or on the verge of homelessness. The city is asking taxpayers for more money for affordable housing. And the city has negotiated a tentative contract requiring millions more for police in order to shore up the depleted ranks of officers.

Certainly, the idea deserves greater debate. To her credit, Fritz is sensibly looking to enact a version of the well-tested, decades-old matching program used by New York City, as opposed to a version of Portland's previous program or a new model built from scratch. As The Oregonian/OregonLive's Brad Schmidt reported, under Fritz's evolving proposal, qualifying

candidates would receive a six-to-one match from the city for each private contribution of up to \$50, turning that initial \$50 commitment into \$350.

Among other requirements, commissioner candidates would have to raise at least \$2,500 from 250 people in order to qualify for the matching program while mayoral candidates would need at least \$5,000 from 500 people. Candidates would also have to abide by spending limits and quicker campaign donation reporting deadlines.

But if Fritz's purpose of reviving a public campaign financing program is to restore trust in government, she's missing the point by not putting it to a vote. You don't rebuild voter trust by ignoring the message they have already sent.

The Portland Tribune

Legislators weigh PERS options, but reach no consensus

By Claire Withycombe

09/22/2016

SALEM — A bipartisan work group aimed at reforming the state's Public Employee Retirement System started taking input on the issue Wednesday afternoon, but reached no consensus.

The system faces \$21.8 billion in unfunded liability — money it owes to PERS beneficiaries but cannot pay.

Though several commenters, including the mayor of Hillsboro and a Bend-La Pine School District Board member, seemed to agree change is needed to both address growing costs to local governments and meet legal requirements, it was not clear Wednesday what direction the intended reforms may take.

While Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, described PERS as a “supercharged and emotional” topic, it's also complex — Steve Rodeman, the executive director of PERS, spent the first 45 minutes of the meeting providing a high-level explanation of the system.

In 2013, the Legislature passed a set of reforms aimed at mitigating growing costs, but those reforms were largely struck down by the Oregon Supreme Court last year. As a result of the decision and low investment returns, public employers will have to contribute \$2.9 billion to the system in the next budget cycle, a hike of \$885 million.

The Legislature is allowed to make changes to current public employees' benefits, but benefits that have already accrued cannot be altered, according to the ruling in that case, *Moro v. Oregon*.

With this parameter in mind, Johnson, and Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend, are leading the charge in an attempt to address the unfunded liability through a work group.

Legislative counsel has vetted 10 possibilities, and late last month released an analysis finding seven of them likely constitutional.

Johnson said the Aug. 31 findings by legislative counsel were not the only options available to legislators.

Senior Deputy Legislative Counsel Marisa James said that her office's Aug. 31 analysis of those possibilities was largely in agreement with a legal analysis presented this week by a Portland law firm, Bennett, Hartman, Morris & Kaplan, LLP, on behalf of five public employee unions.

In a letter submitted to Johnson and Knopp, representatives of those unions said they were "deeply skeptical" that the reform effort "is about finding 'solutions' or taking a broader look at all the budgetary challenges the state faces."

Some examples of those possibilities include instituting a \$100,000 cap on final annual salary used to calculate benefits, using a market rate for annuities, and using calculate the benefit based on the average of the last five years salary instead of the last three.

Another option would stop the practice of allowing unused vacation and sick time payments to be included when calculating the final salary.

In the Aug. 31 letter, legislative counsel acknowledged that some of these possibilities, though likely constitutional, could prove politically controversial and risk being challenged in court.

The three options that didn't make the cut set by legislative counsel included changing the retirement age, reducing a factor by which years of service and final average salary are multiplied in the formula used to calculate pension benefit, or discontinuing the pension program altogether.

Cheri Helt, a member of the board of Bend-La Pine Schools, in comments to Knopp and Johnson at the work group meeting Wednesday, said that her school district faces significant personnel cuts as a result of increased PERS costs.

Tim Nesbitt, a former adviser to former governors John Kitzhaber and Ted Kulongoski, in comments Wednesday at the request of the Oregon Business Council, said that the state must be mindful of moderating cost increases as a percentage of local government and district payroll.

He said that continued increases could divert money from the local services that those districts and governments provide.

Willamette Week

Portland Is Making 612 Public Restrooms Gender Neutral

"Safe access to a restroom is a basic right," says Commissioner Nick Fish.

By Johanna Bernhard
09/22/2016

Portland city government has converted more than 600 of its single-user, gender-specific public restrooms to all-user, gender-neutral facilities.

Commissioners Nick Fish and Amanda Fritz will tomorrow unveil the new signs hanging on the doors of the existing single-user restrooms, marking the change to "all-user" restrooms.

The signs, city officials said, will tell users what facilities are behind the door, not who should be using the restroom.

Fish proposed the reform in December 2015, partnering with community groups including Basic Rights Oregon, Multnomah County and Disability Rights Oregon.

The city council adopted the proposal in June, which applies to "city-controlled" buildings.

"Everyone should feel welcome in our city," Fish said in a statement. "Safe access to a restroom is a basic right and I'm very proud that the city has taken this important step forward."

The resolution, according to city officials, affirmed the city's commitment to removing barriers and creating safer workplaces for employees and treating everyone equally with respect and dignity.

The city manages around 850 restrooms. Fish's office says 612 of those restrooms are single-user facilities and nearly half are run by Portland Parks and Recreation.

"As Parks Commissioner, I am proud that nearly half of the restrooms with more inclusive signage are located on our facilities," Fritz said in a statement.

Fritz and Fish will unveil the signs on Friday at 11am in Dawson Park at North Williams Avenue and Stanton Street.