

## Willamette Week

# New Rules Would Preserve a Ritzy Portland Neighborhood— And Block Apartments For Low-Income Seniors

*By Rachel Monahan*

*October 4, 2016*

For the past year, Portland City Hall has repeatedly said it has no higher priority than addressing the city's housing crunch.

It's why Mayor Charlie Hales declared a housing emergency a year ago, and why the city is asking voters to approve a \$258 million bond issue in November.

Yet city officials are also preparing this week to hear recommendations from city planners to place new restrictions on the height and density of new apartment buildings in an affluent westside neighborhood.

The zoning changes would block the development of 160 apartments for low-income senior citizens along Northwest 18th Avenue in the Alphabet District.

More importantly, the recommendations could limit future development along a street slated to receive a new bus line—the kind of corridor where Portland has pledged to welcome new development.

Northwest Housing Alternatives, one of the state's leading affordable-housing developers, has been working on plans for the 160-unit building for more than seven months. Its director says she's baffled why city leaders would consider blocking the kind of low-income housing they're asking voters to bankroll.

"We're concerned for the project," says Martha McLennan, executive director of Northwest Housing Alternatives. "We're also concerned at a more philosophical level that the city is reducing the apartments that can be built in a neighborhood that's walkable and has good access to transit and services." (The dispute was first reported Oct. 4 by the Portland Tribune.)

The City Council will begin Oct. 6 to consider a zoning change recommended by the Planning and Sustainability Commission. If passed, it would mean developers could build half as densely in a roughly 20-square-block area of the Alphabet District as well as in a few blocks of Northeast's Irvington neighborhood. The changes would also lower maximum building height by at least 10 feet, as part of an effort to preserve the historic character of two of Portland's wealthiest neighborhoods.

That would make projects like Northwest Housing Alternatives' building impossible to finance, the owner and the developer say. It also appears to protect the property values of handsome Victorian homes at the expense of senior citizens making less than \$15,000 a year.

"If you say we have an affordability housing problem," says economist Joe Cortright, "and then you restrict the ability to build more housing in the places where people want to live, then you're not dealing with housing affordability."

A year ago Friday, City Hall officially declared a housing emergency, as upward of 1,800 people camped on city streets. The council passed new ordinances to protect renters and referred a

housing bond to voters for the first time to build or restore 1,300 affordable apartments. But the zoning proposal is a new test of the city's commitment, given that it runs up against the opposition of neighborhood groups.

Officials with regional planning agency Metro publicly objected to the Alphabet District's downzoning in August.

"The affordable-housing crisis we currently face requires that an increasing supply of housing be developed in order to keep pace with demand," wrote Metro's chief operating officer, Martha Bennett. "Our region is depending on the city of Portland to accommodate a significant proportion of the region's growth in population and employment."

The neighborhood is also slated for a new bus line that would provide direct service from the central city to North Portland, traveling up Northwest 18th Avenue and over the Fremont Bridge when funding becomes available, according to TriMet.

But city planners who approved the downzoning recommendation last month say historic preservation trumps new buildings—especially in historic neighborhoods surrounded by construction cranes.

"I get the big picture: They want to have all the room they can have for more people," says Chris Smith, vice chairman of the planning commission, which officially approved the downzoning recommendations last month. "We've been fairly selective. They can relax and chill a little."

Historic preservationists say neighborhoods need more protections against developers as the city grows.

Neighborhood advocates argue the new zoning will make the city's historic requirements clearer, and avoid creating a perverse incentive to demolish existing apartment buildings with low rents.

"I don't think [affordable housing] trumps everything else," says Karen Karlsson, president of the Northwest District Association. "I think it should be compatible with everything else."

But McLennan notes the property owner had tried—and failed—to win approval to demolish a three-story 1919 building on the property two years ago, and instead adjusted plans to incorporate it into the new apartment project. She says that shows the current historic protections are working without new regulations.

"This is just a blanket prohibition," says McLennan.

The property owner, Mark O'Donnell, is furious.

"We are at a loss to understand," he says, "why the City Council would ask Portland voters to approve \$258.4 million of general obligation bonds to provide approximately 1,300 affordable apartments and, at the same time, approve [a policy] that eliminates 160 units of affordable housing at no cost to the city of Portland."

Yet Hales and all four of his colleagues on the City Council say they haven't made up their minds.

Hales is "a little bit skeptical" of the new rules, says his policy adviser, Camille Trummer.

"We're in a housing crisis," she tells WW. "While each neighborhood did propose these changes, he's not sure if it's going to satisfy the needs of the housing supply in terms of long-term planning."

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Housing Bureau, is also waiting to make a final decision, says his chief of staff, Brendan Finn.

"With demand outpacing supply and production, Commissioner Saltzman is seeking opportunities in the comprehensive plan to increase the production of affordable and market-rate housing," says Finn. "This proposal appears to run counter to that goal."

## **The Portland Observer**

### **Pushed from the Agenda**

*By Cervante Pope*

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Advocates for police reforms to empower civil rights against racial profiling and other unjust police practices have joined together to stop, at least temporarily, Mayor Charlie Hales from getting approval of a new labor contract for members of the Portland Police Bureau.

"You serve the community first, and then you serve the police second," activist Jamaal Washington told Mayor Hales and members of the Portland City Council last week. "We are not subjects, we are citizens and our voices are supposed to mean something."

Williams is among a large group of protestors, including members of Black Lives Matter and Don't Shoot PDX who camped outside of City Hall last week, that pledge to continue to protest at the front doors of city government over a police contract they say rewards police officers financially without making the streets safer for minority and disadvantaged residents.

The current Portland Police Association contract doesn't expire until June 17, six months after Hales' term as mayor is over, leaving many to wonder why the rush. Some of the activists said the next labor agreement with police officers should be negotiated with incoming Mayor Ted Wheeler, who doesn't take office until January.

"Where is the fire?" Portland NAACP President Jo Ann Hardesty said, calling the contract Hales submitted as one that reflects a narrow focus on giving raises and not taking in the will or voice of the community.

The proposed labor agreement boasts a nine percent raise overall for police officers over the next three years, a bonus fee for recruiting new officers, a higher starting pay for new officers, and gives retired officers who come back to duty for six years the highest pay grade available.

"We're against this because essentially they're going to be paying more for maniac cops to come in and kill us," said Danielle James, a local mother who also said her daughter was assaulted by a Portland Police officer after being racially profiled. "These cops don't know our children; they don't know that this 14-year-old black kid walking with a hoodie and sweatpants is actually an Ivy League student that didn't just rob a store."

James argued it's not in the best interest of the community to have more officers on the streets if the police that are on duty are not adequately prepared in the way they deal with members of the black community and other minority populations.

She called for a contract that expands psychological evaluations for police currently on the job and weeds out cops who may not be good for the profession, providing as an example, a person bullied throughout life who becomes a cop and holds a superiority complex over the residents they serve.

James' brother Maqueal, from his standpoint as someone who witnessed the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, said of Portland's police and community interactions, "We don't get any peaceful sleep because we know we have to wake up and deal with the same old mess on our plate."

Another issue that riled up the activist citizens was a proposed policy on body camera footage that would allow officers to review the video prior to writing incident reports. Hales accepted the terms in private negotiations with the union, going outside a pledge he made to allow the public to weigh in on the contract, the advocates said.

Talks between Hales and the activists broke down last week after the mayor suddenly moved a scheduled meeting between the groups from City Hall to the Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church, a historically black congregation in north Portland.

The lack of enthusiasm for the contract continued the following Wednesday during a City Council meeting.

The mayor amended the body camera proposal to say "substantial public input will be required prior to finalization of the policy," but verbiage stating the police union still has the final decision on video viewing hadn't changed, drew widespread condemnation from the activists.

Many approached the podium with heated words for the mayor and city commissioners. Comments by David Kif Davis of Multnomah County Copwatch led to Hales storming out of the chambers, leaving the audience in the dark for around 20 minutes.

With much of the public's testimony being not having enough time to read and fully comprehend the contract, Hales finally decided to postpone the council's vote for at least until Oct. 13. He also agreed to open this week's agenda for more discussion on the issues.

"You're just pretending to listen to us," McKelvey said at the podium. "We all know what you're going to do once this meeting is over."

Nevertheless, the activists saw triumph in the delay.

"We view this as a victory for our movement, says McKelvey. "We have won the battle but the war is still to come."

Monday, Hales issued a statement saying there was understandable confusion about the collective bargaining agreement and offered to address the concerns.

He said the agreement was needed to fill officer vacancies and that it reinforces accountability and transparency in the Police Bureau. He also asked residents to read the contract on the City Auditor's website along with a draft proposal on police using body worn cameras.