

The Oregonian

City can't replace neighborhoods, but needs to bring families home: Editorial Agenda 2017

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
January 27, 2017*

The City of Portland is working to bring hundreds of residents or their families back to the neighborhoods in North and Northeast Portland that were stolen from them decades ago.

It's been a long process. Painful for the time it recalls and in the ways it falls short. Yet it is good and necessary, despite the fact the housing assistance program could never replace the loss of homes, respect and community.

Take Thelma Glover, with whom Oregonian/OregonLive reporter Casey Parks visited many times before sharing her story earlier this month. Glover, now 98, moved to Portland in the 1940s, when many businesses wouldn't serve African Americans and she wasn't allowed to put her teaching degree to use in local schools.

As Parks wrote, Glover and her husband worked menial jobs for years until they had raised the money needed to buy a home in a generally undesirable area near Portland's polluting industrial core that city leaders had designated for the growing population of African Americans.

For Glover and hundreds of other families, the neighborhoods in North and Northeast Portland represented independence. Churches, jazz clubs and black-owned businesses dotted the streets and anchored the community where families could more easily come together and care for their own and their neighbors.

And then it was gone. City leaders deemed the neighborhoods where as many as 70 percent of the city's African American population lived "blighted." That was, of course, due in part to the fact that many families still struggled to get by and banks refused to provide them credit to make needed repairs. Homes on Glover's block and 22 others were razed, yet the federal money planned for redevelopment in the area ran out and the land sat empty for 40 years.

Portland's year-old program to acknowledge our past city leaders' despicable behavior is a solid start. As city officials have said, it's not restitution but a goal to prioritize housing assistance for those who were displaced from North and Northeast Portland - and their direct descendants -- and offer them a path back home. It's also more sustainable than other, similar attempts. Portland's plan has met federal fair housing laws, unlike programs in San Francisco and New York City.

But the program fails to make amends to people like Glover. She falls short of the reparations and that's shameful. Other improvements are also needed. Portland housing officials hoped to drum up wide interest and notify those who had been displaced or their children and grandchildren. Kurt Creager, director of the Portland Housing Bureau, said he and program leaders opted to limit how much information was presented early on because they were afraid that too much fine-print might scare away potential participants.

"We didn't want people to be intimidated by too much information and self-select themselves out," he said, "it's a delicate balance."

It worked. More than a thousand people applied for loan assistance to buy homes in the area and micro-condominiums. But then, in large public meetings, many of those applicants discovered they didn't meet the program's income standards, which are understandably necessary to be sure people aren't helped into homes that they ultimately cannot afford.

Some community members and displaced families complained they would have rather had that information early on. In Portland's rabid real estate and rental market, the potential for home loan assistance and rent subsidies had inspired much hope.

In the zeal to push this laudable program forward and gain national acclaim for doing so, city officials must continue to be mindful of adding insult to this decades-old injury. Work should continue to inform the community of the program, both as often and with as much detail as possible. Another good change would be to allow news media into the meetings held for potential participants to keep the process transparent for all.

The program is now entering its second phase, which will offer hundreds of subsidized apartments. Hopefully, housing bureau officials and the program's oversight committee will continue to seek suggestions on improving the program, which could become a model for the other large cities across the country whose leaders pushed out unwelcome populations.

Unfortunately, the housing assistance program came too late for Glover. Her fixed income falls short of the financial standards necessary to qualify for a home loan, as reporter Parks wrote. While the program allows participants to help build their homes, providing "sweat equity" when their financial means fall short, that too is out of reach for Glover, whose health has begun failing in recent weeks.

Glover's story will make this program stronger and hopefully, help current North and Northeast Portland residents understand their neighborhoods' history and honor those returning.

Already there is hope. In the days after her story was published, Parks received hundreds of emails and calls offering to help Glover, whether to provide financial help, the "sweat equity" or simply a ride to the North Portland church where she's been a member for 60 years.

Nearly-defunct Portland police oversight board begs for renewed life

*By Maxine Bernstein
January 27, 2017*

As the clock ticked toward the end of their volunteer terms, the remaining members of a dying Portland community police oversight committee begged the city's new mayor and federal Justice officials for a life line.

"It breaks my heart to see COAB dissolve like this," said Philip Wolfe, chair of the soon-to-be defunct Community Oversight Advisory Board, a group the city formed to help monitor police reforms that are part of the city's settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice. "Say it's not OK."

Due to lack of training and city support, a 15-member citizen board dwindled to just seven members, with two chairpersons and multiple members resigning, the city refusing to fill their positions and instead putting the board on a two-month hiatus last year.

As a result, the U.S. Department of Justice last fall found the city out of compliance with the settlement agreement in regards to its community engagement requirement.

The city had created the community board as part of its settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice after a 2012 federal investigation found police engaged in excessive force against people with mental illnesses. Investigators also found that police improperly used stun guns against suspects.

The agreement not only called for reforms to police training and policies, it required the city and police to enhance their outreach to the community, described as a "critical resource" to promote public safety. It also required the city to allow community members to provide independent oversight of the reforms.

U.S. District Judge Michael H. Simon late last year ordered the city to return to his courtroom by the end of January to provide an update on how it planned to comply with the community oversight prong of the agreement, but the city balked. Instead, the City Council voted to appeal Simon's order, arguing that the city never agreed to appear in court beyond previously-scheduled annual status conferences.

Meanwhile, the Community Oversight Advisory Board has received no feedback on the 50-plus policy recommendations it crafted on police use of force, improving police encounters with people in crisis and ways to combat bias-based policing, leaving the remaining members extremely frustrated.

"It's a farce to talk about community engagement when the city and the Department of Justice has abandoned the COAB and taken steps to ignore the community," said attorney Tom Steenson, one of the last remaining board members.

"Our term is almost up and nothing's really been done," bemoaned board member Catherine Gardner.

The board members' terms are set to expire Jan. 31, and the city has no plan to extend them.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who attended Thursday night's session, pledged he will review the board's recommendations and promised "this will not be the end of community engagement."

Wheeler said he didn't believe the board "was particularly effective in achieving its objectives," and wanted to know what didn't work.

The remaining members blamed city attorneys and the Chicago-based team of academics, Dennis Rosenbaum and Amy Watson, hired to monitor the city's compliance with the settlement, for not allowing the board to act independently.

Former board member Sharon Maxwell urged the city to replace Rosenbaum and Watson with a court monitor, have the community board report instead to Judge Simon and allow the board to have an independent legal advisor "to get this process back on track and respect the volunteers who have given their time."

"We did not have independence," Maxwell told Wheeler. "We were strong-armed," by the city.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Adrian Brown, representing the U.S. Department of Justice, praised the volunteers for the tremendous hours they've put in.

"I find your comments hollow," Steenson responded. "Because if you felt our work was that important, you would have filed a motion finding the city in noncompliance but apparently you're unwilling to do that."

The Justice Department did find the city in non-compliance but has to give the city a chance to remedy the problem, Brown said. Federal justice officials, city attorneys, the Portland Police Association and Albina Ministerial Alliance are in talks to come up with a new community engagement process, she said.

The city had hoped to come up with a solution by the end of January, but won't meet that goal. It may take a couple of months, Brown said. Any changes to the settlement will have to be approved by the City Council and the court.

The Justice Department is trying to apply pressure to have the city craft a solution and hopes that will prove "more fruitful than contentious litigation," Brown said.

Board member Rochelle Silver said she doesn't believe the city is acting in good faith. "All they're doing is playing with you, playing with us, playing with the good citizens and taxpayers of the city of Portland," she said.

The remaining volunteer members of the board pleaded to have their terms extended beyond Jan. 31, until at least a new group is created. The Albina Ministerial Alliance, a group of church leaders and other community members who have pushed for police reforms, said the gap in oversight by members of the public will just further "alienate and aggravate" the community.

Brown said it was the city's decision to dissolve the board.

Wheeler told those gathered that he knows their "passions are sincere," and they've worked to do right for the people who are most vulnerable in the city. He said he agreed training is crucial for volunteer community board members, and supported assigning an independent legal counsel to such a board.

As police commissioner, Wheeler said he wants the final say in deciding a police officer's discipline, and called the current system achieved through bargaining in which an arbitrator can overrule the firing or suspension of an officer, "a terrible mistake."

"It's one of the things I want to get back through the bargaining process," the mayor told the group.

After the meeting, Wheeler told The Oregonian/OregonLive that he has no real plan on how to challenge police arbitration on disciplinary matters.

"It's a long shot in the near term," he acknowledged. "How we get from here to there, I don't know. I just know we need to get there."

From his meeting with the nearly-defunct community board, Wheeler said he recognizes there's a lot of disappointment.

"I'll take a good look at their recommendations to figure out what is the right process going forward," he said.

People forget, he said, that much of the concerns about police interactions with people in mental health crises grew out of the tragedy of the 2006 death in Portland police custody of James P. Chasse Jr., who suffered from schizophrenia. Wheeler was Multnomah County's chair when the county approved a record \$925,000 to settle its part of a federal civil rights lawsuit brought by the Chasse family.

"I was the one who had to sign the check for Multnomah County. It was a very sad time," he said. "As a community, we could do a lot better."

Kudos to Portland's mayor and police (Letters to the Editor)

*By Letters to the Editor
January 27, 2017*

Thank you, Portland police

Portland police are doing a fantastic job stopping those idiots who disrupt the city. They did an excellent job containing these hoodlums from repeating what occurred under Charlie Hales administration.

Finally, our mayor and police are taking back the city for hard-working taxpayers!

Greg Sock, Southeast Portland

Free speech, high price

I would like to express my thanks to our new mayor, Ted Wheeler, for saying what he will do and following through to keep all Portland citizens safe. Keeping the protesters under control is a great improvement from past events.

I do not disagree that the protesters have a right to freedom of speech. But that freedom does not include imposing or forcing beliefs on others. Blocking parents from picking up their children from school or a sick person from swift transport to medical care is not acceptable. Then there is the cost to local government of responding to the protests.

I say thank you to Mayor Wheeler, Portland police and the city crews that must clean up the mess left behind.

Mark Montgomery, Southwest Portland

Cops and the homeless

I have sympathy for Portland's police. I have spent years volunteering with homeless folks, and I have only positive recollections of police treating our homeless with patience and kindness.

Protester Star Stafford demands that a police officer check on any homeless person he or she sees sleeping on the streets. I can only imagine how quickly that police action would be attacked as harassment.

Damned if you do and damned if you don't.

The Skanner

Shaping the South Waterfront Greenway

By Melanie Sevcenko

January 26, 2017

Portland's breakneck growth can be both a topic of protest or profit, depending on who's steering the conversation. Yet as the city's numerous development projects trudge forward – with or without community input – some interested parties are asking for your two cents.

A number of key players and urban giants – Zidell Corp., Kaiser Permanente, the Portland Development Commission, among them – have helped sculpt Portland's historical landscapes and contemporary additions. And on February 7 they're coming together to lay the groundwork of a slow-churning yet much-anticipated development: [the North Reach of the South Waterfront Greenway](#).

The meeting is one in a series from Zidell's Project Advisory Committee, which is considering the interests of several entities over its swath of land on the west side of the Willamette River, stretching southward between the Marquam and Ross Island bridges.

While the committee is comprised of stakeholders, public representatives and agencies, and corporate consultants, February's meeting is also an opportunity for anybody to voice an idea (or an opinion) about how the 33-acre site could benefit the community at large.

Owned by Zidell, the property (commonly called Zidell Yards) underwent a \$20 million clean-up in 2011, which included 3,000 feet of riverbank restoration, as part of the 2004 Greenway Development Plan. In the decade that has passed, a lot has happened on the South Waterfront – an OHSU expansion, Tri-Met's Orange Line, an aerial tram, and the Tilikum Crossing, to name just a few.

This year will bring a cessation of Zidell's barge business to make way for Phase I of the company's Master Plan. Working in partnership with the PDC and the City of Portland, Zidell has laid out the street grid, defined park areas and open spaces, and delineated between residential and commercial property.

“(The committee) has discussed what the important tenets are for the design and moving forward,” Alan Park, Development Operations Manager of Zidell, told The Skanner. “So the deliverable out of this process is about a 10 percent, very conceptual layout of what the greenway could look like.”

That means there's some wiggle room.

As part of the City of Portland's [Comprehensive Plan](#), Portland Parks & Recreation (PP&R) is working in tandem with the big players to develop a trail that will close a gap in the larger Willamette Greenway Trail. The critical link would connect bikers and walkers from downtown Portland in the north to Sellwood and John's Landing in the south. The Greenway is also part of a greater trail system, called the 40-Mile Loop (actually 140 miles now), which winds through more than 30 city parks.

"The significance of the Greenway trail is that it starts to create connectivity," said Elizabeth Kennedy-Wong, Community Engagement Manager at PP&R.

According to a Parks-conducted [community survey](#), the trail has credible support from southwest residents, who expressed an interest in connecting it to the Central District Trail and ensuring that it reflects the natural history of the area.

"We need to build a trail that meets the needs of the community," said Kennedy-Wong.

But those needs could include much more, according to Henry Mead Kaiser. As an advocate of Portland's rich history – that includes his family's shipbuilding business, which preceded its namesake healthcare – Kaiser is focused on making the area engaging for residents and visitors alike.

While he stresses his official independence from any involved party, Kaiser said his interests lie in exploring a variety of grassroots initiatives that could come together under the Greenway umbrella.

"They need a common voice," said Kaiser, referring to a jumble of interests and projects concerning the Oregon maritime experience, the shipyards – which brought together a mix of Black and minority workers in the 1940s, culminating in the town of [Vanport](#) – and Kaiser Permanente's forthcoming 75th anniversary.

"If you get the critical mass in good connection with two or three key property owners or organizations in the area, then there's an opportunity for a development that creates a footprint to enrich the city experience for the next century," said Kaiser.

Among numerous potential uses for the site, Kaiser has suggested exhibit space for groups like The Black Pioneers and educational resources for school districts. He's also calling on input from the Oregon Maritime Museum, OMSI, and the Portland Opera, which have all made their homes along both sides of the river.

In line with Kaiser's sentiments is Roger Gertenrich, former mayor of Salem and member of the Project Advisory Committee. Through a volunteer effort with a small group of South Waterfront residents, Gertenrich is proposing a low-cost, free-standing outdoor maritime display to honor Portland's nautical past through photographs, texts and artifacts.

With far-reaching support from several organizations and associations, Gertenrich believes the city's maritime history should be one of several diverse narratives represented along the Greenway.

"What we have going here is a love story," said Gertenrich. "Everybody loves their history, everyone loves the Willamette River, and everyone has a story to tell."

The “open house” for the South Waterfront Greenway – North Reach will be held on Tuesday, Feb. 7, from 6 – 8 p.m, at the Southwest Charter School, 0640 SW Bancroft St., Portland.