

The Portland Tribune

As Rents Rise, City Seeks Ways to Save Arts Scene

By Jim Redden

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Council to consider creative solutions that won't include new public funding during Tuesday work session.

Artists, arts organizations and arts venues have been hit especially hard by the recent increase in property values in Portland.

Much attention has been paid to the plight of lower-income residents since the Great Recession ended and property values started increasing. But those in the arts also have been displaced by rising rents and redevelopment projects that replaced low-cost studios and performance spaces.

Creative spaces that have been displaced in recent years include Towne Storage, Troy Laundry, Artichoke Music, Crossroads Music, Theater! Theater!, Jimmy Mak's, Conduit Dance, The Fremont Theater, the PSU Dance Department, and the Ash Street Saloon.

The City Council will consider 24 proposals for helping the local arts community better survive the changes during a work session scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Tuesday, Jan. 9. The presentation — contained in a report titled "A Plan for Preserving and Expanding Affordable Arts Space in Portland" — was initiated two years ago by Commissioner Nick Fish, who is the official council liaison to the arts community. Mayor Ted Wheeler and Commissioner Chloe Eudaly became involved when they took office last January.

"The cost of living in Portland is rising rapidly. This has created a housing crisis. Displacement, gentrification, aggressive development, and real estate market dynamics are making it impossible for artists to afford to live here. We stand at a moment where we risk losing many of the things that make Portland a desirable place to live, work and play," says the report, which was put together with the assistance of multiple arts organizations and employees from numerous city bureaus.

According to Fish's chief of staff Sonia Schmanski, the conversation about the need to do something got serious in September 2015 when the Towne Storage building in inner Southeast Portland was sold and the artists living there were evicted. She and other staffers held meetings with other artists facing eviction over the next few months, and Fish identified the issue as a priority in January 2016. While researching what other cities are doing, Schmanski traveled to a conference on affordable art spaces in Seattle in October 2017. Other participating cities included San Francisco, Vancouver, British Columbia, and Los Angeles.

None of the proposals would direct new public funds to artists or arts organizations. Instead, they call for such steps as creating an inventory and map of creative spaces in Portland, encouraging new creative spaces in public and private buildings, and working with neighborhood and business associations to establish creative districts throughout the city.

One proposal would re-establish an "arts concierge" position within the Bureau of Development Services that lapsed when the previous employee retired. Such one-on-one help is needed because "artists and arts-related organizations are not necessarily well-versed in leasing, acquisition or development of commercial space," the proposal says.

Some of the proposals are based on policies that already are in effect in other cities. For example, Seattle and San Francisco already map and post the locations of many creative spaces on their official websites.

"Cities have been facing these same problems for decades, and community leaders have worked to find new solutions to old problems. This means that there is a wealth of information from trusted partners about what works, and what doesn't," the report says.

Many of the proposals require action by multiple city bureaus. In addition to BDS, Prosper Portland (formerly called the Portland Development Commission) would be asked to explore creating a real estate investment model to create ownership opportunities for arts organizations. Existing examples in other cities include the Community Arts Stabilization Trust (CAST) in San Francisco, CulturalDC in Washington, D.C., and Equinox Development Unlimited in Seattle.

The report also calls for examining city policies that might contribute to the loss of low-cost creative spaces. They could include ongoing efforts to compel the owners of unreinforced masonry buildings to bring them up to current seismic standards.

"Commissioner Fish has been very clear with Mayor Wheeler that he wants a careful balance between ensuring community resilience and not making our affordability crisis worse by removing the most affordable places where people live and work," Schmanski says.

The current plight of the creative community is not new. It was among the topics discussed during the first public forum for City Council candidates during the 2016 primary election. The forum was hosted by the Regional Arts and Culture Council at the Armory Building that houses the Gerding Theater on Jan. 26 of that year.

The council already has approved numerous policies to support and encourage the arts community. They include the Art Plan adopted in 1989 when the creative community was contributing an estimated \$89 million a year to the economy. That figure had grown to \$300 million a year by 2009, an increase far beyond the rate of inflation. The council also is continuing to support the controversial \$35-a-year arts tax approved by voters at the November 2012 general election to help fund arts teachers and organizations.

City Hall Update: Gang Violence Down for Second Year

*By Jim Redden
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Plus, Portland Housing Bureau keeps better tab on investments and new sale requirement on homes took effect on Jan. 1.

Gang violence continued to drop in Portland in 2017.

By the end of the year, the Portland Police Bureau's Gang Enforcement Team had investigated 122 incidents. That compares to 159 incidents, which was down from the official record high of 193 in 2015.

Almost all of the incidents in all three years were shootings. No one was reported injured in most of them.

Police veterans say the numbers were significantly higher in the 1980s and 1990s, when the increase in gang activity caught city leaders by surprise. Gang-related incidents were not tracked separately in those days, however.

Housing bureau keeps better tab on investments

The Portland Housing Bureau has improved its monitoring of affordable housing projects that are owned by other parties but partly built with city funds, according to an audit released last Tuesday.

The City Auditor's Office report found the PHB has followed up on recommendations in a 2014 audit and is now doing a better job ensuring that tenants are eligible to live in the buildings, that rents are appropriate, and that loan payments are being consistently made.

There are about 280 multifamily projects in the city's portfolio. The city actually will own the properties acquired and built by the PHB with the \$284.5 million affordable housing bond approved at the November 2016 general election.

Home sale requirement kicked in on Jan. 1

On Jan. 1, Portland became the only city in the country to require sellers of single-family homes to disclose a home energy report and score at the time of listing.

The reports and scores must be produced by third-party home energy assessors authorized by the city and Earth Advantage. Costs are estimated to range from \$150 to \$250, although the city will offer them for free to income-qualified sellers.

The city expects the requirement will result in lower residential energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. More information can be found at www.pdxhes.com.