

The Oregonian

Mayor: Efforts to Aid Portland's Black Neighborhoods an 'Abject Failure'

*By Gordon R. Friedman
April 4, 2018*

The city of Portland's strategy to help black residents stay in or move back to their gentrifying neighborhoods falls far short of expectations, a new report says.

Despite millions of dollars of taxpayer investments, few families have been able to benefit from city subsidies developed expressly to aid homeowners with generational ties to north and northeast Portland neighborhoods, according to the report, issued by the North/Northeast Neighborhood Housing Strategy Oversight Committee. City commissioners were briefed on the highly critical report Wednesday.

Mayor Ted Wheeler said he was "highly disappointed," adding that the city is "way off the mark" on reaching commitments enshrined in its housing strategy.

As an example of the city's shortcomings, the panel noted that only five families have used a down payment assistance program, in part because they believe the subsidy is too low. It was hoped that 65 would sign up for a down payment subsidy of \$100,000 per home buyer.

"I don't see how I can sit here with a straight face and call it anything other than an abject failure," Wheeler said of the subsidy program.

In another example, just 18 families used a program that provides zero-interest loans for home repairs. "Millions of dollars were budgeted this year for this program," the report said of the special loan offerings, "yet relatively few dollars were spent and minimal families benefited."

Shannon Callahan, interim director of the Portland Housing Bureau, said in response that the city made a "mistake" in setting aside too much money for the loan program.

The city's housing strategy is driven in part by an affordable housing preference policy. That system gives priority access to Portlanders who owned property taken by the city and their descendants. As an example, people displaced during the construction of the Memorial Colosseum and a planned expansion of what was then Emanuel Hospital – both of which devastated historically black neighborhoods – may be eligible for housing assistance under the preference policy.

City bureaus and non-governmental groups have been able to develop some housing in line with the north/northeast neighborhoods strategy. More than 500 rental units have been built within neighborhood boundaries, said Bishop Steven Holt, chairman of the oversight panel, who is also a local pastor.

Citing an enormous need to fix Portland's deteriorating streets, parks and other infrastructure, the City Council on Wednesday approved Wheeler's plan to complete seven long put-off maintenance projects, with a cost of \$50 million.

But demand far outpaced supply. More than 735 individuals and families applied for just 31 units available at the newly-built Garlington Place Apartments at the corner of Northeast Monroe Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

"We have a long way to go," remarked Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who ran the Housing Bureau when the neighborhood plan was developed. Commissioner Nick Fish said rarely is the city council presented with a report that documents "so many failures" in a single city initiative.

For his part, Wheeler said "the buck stops with me" on problems with the Housing Bureau and city economic development bureau Prosper Portland, since he is their commissioner-in-charge. Wheeler said he and the rest of the city council will be expected to deliver on housing promises made to the families gentrified and displaced out of Portland's black neighborhoods.

"I'm going to hold everybody accountable for ensuring that we see good progress," Wheeler said.

Portland City Council Reopens Door for Pearl District Apartment Building Opposed by Neighbors

Elliot Njus

April 4, 2018

The Portland City Council reversed itself Wednesday on an earlier decision to block a Pearl District apartment building that neighbors had opposed.

The council in March unanimously rejected the 17-story tower proposed by Lincoln Property Co. of Dallas, Texas. It raised concerns largely centered around the development's effect on the Willamette River Greenway, an effort to piece together a continuous trail along the river.

But Mayor Ted Wheeler asked the council to revisit its decision on the project after he had second thoughts about making the projects' developers start the permitting process over. He said Wednesday it might be simpler to reopen the record, allowing Lincoln to tweak its design.

In a unanimous vote, the five city commissioners signaled they would overturn the Portland Design Commission's earlier approval of the 17-story tower.

Commissioners Nick Fish and Chloe Eudaly joined the mayor in reversing the earlier decision and reopening the record.

The Pearl District Neighborhood Association brought the issue to the City Council. The group had argued the building would block views of the Willamette River and the Fremont Bridge, including from the nearby The Fields Park, and it would set a precedent for future development at that scale.

Commissioners said they weren't swayed by the views, but rather by the encroachment on the public greenway.

"This is not about views for me," Wheeler said. But he said he was swayed by the argument that the council would set precedent. "How we choose to do this project will set the standard for all of the other projects that will happen in the immediate area. That includes the bike-pedestrian pathway through the area."

But housing activists saw the council's earlier decision as bending to opposition to development at the expense of long-term affordability. None of the units are affordable, but a shortage of housing in recent years amid a population boom has helped bid up rents and home prices.

The development would include 275 market-rate apartments. It was proposed in 2016, before the city passed a requirement for developments to include rent-restricted units for low-income residents.

Developers said the decision added to a cloud of uncertainty in Portland, which they said could discourage future investment in the city.

The commissioners each disclosed a long list of contacts with the public on both sides of the issue, but not with the developer or neighborhood association. Wheeler said the issue had been raised in a discussion at a grocery store and a car wash.

The council isn't supposed to take any of those contacts into account in this matter. The proceeding is a "quasi-judicial" hearing, meaning the council is supposed to limit its decision to criteria outlined in city code without regard other political or civic considerations.

Commissioner Amanda Fritz opposed reconsidering the decision -- saying she had asked the mayor, "Are you crazy?" when he raised the issue -- and said the design's shortcomings went beyond just the greenway, including the building's bulk. She said the council's reversal would likely to attract an appeal to a state land-use board.

Commissioner Dan Saltzman also voted against reopening the record, saying he's concerned that allowing developers to tweak projects at this late stage undermines the Portland Design Commission and invites more appeals to the City Council.

The council will again reconsider the proposed development next month.

The Portland Tribune

Report: N/NE Portland Housing Strategy Falling Short

By Jim Redden

April 5, 2018

City Council is disappointed by \$20 million program's lack of progress since it was approved in 2014.

The City Council is falling far short of the goals it set several years ago to fight displacement caused by gentrification in North and Northeast Portland.

The council dedicated \$20 million in urban renewal funds to the North/Northeast Portland Housing Strategy in 2014. But the funding has only helped a relatively small number of lower-income households stay in their homes and move back into the area so far, according to a report presented to the council by the Portland Housing Bureau on Wednesday.

"We have a long way to go," said Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who was in charge of the housing bureau when the program was approved. Mayor Ted Wheeler assigned the bureau to himself when he became mayor last year.

The 2017 annual report of the North/Northeast Portland Housing Strategy documents how many parts of the program are falling short. Among other things, it says that although more than 500 new rental units have been built in the area, too few have been set aside for lower-income households. For example, 735 applications were receive for just 31 units in the recently completed Garlington Place Apartments at the corner of Northeast MLK Jr. Boulevard and Monroe Street.

In addition, only five households have purchased a home with the help of a \$100,000 down payment subsidy though the program. It was originally predicted that 65 households would have taken advantage of the subsidy by now.

"I don't see how I can sit here with a straight face and call it anything other than an abject failure," Wheeler said.

And just 18 families used a multi-million program that offers zero-interest loans for home repairs — down from 40 in 2016.

On top of that, the advisory committee has not yet approved a plan to help fund accessory dwelling units in the area, even though they potentially the least expensive form of new housing. Interim housing bureau director Shannon Callahan told the council that the advisory committee has recommended several changes to increase participation in the program, including increasing the amounts of the down payment subsidies and zero-interest home repair loans. She also noted that multiple additional apartments are either under construction or being planned that will increase the number of affordable units in coming years.

"We are convinced, that providing long term solutions for individuals and families can be accomplished. What is in front of us is going to require a greater willingness from both PHB and the community partners to communicate issues, work through those issues and come to agreement," the report says.

You can read the report at www.portlandoregon.gov/auditor/article/678647.

Willamette Week

Pearl District Tower Gets a Second Chance to Win Approval From Portland City Council

*By Rachel Monahan
April 4, 2018*

The recent vote on Fremont Place Apartments was the first time in 12 years that City Council had overruled an approval by Design Commission.

A high-rise apartment building in the Pearl District—whose fate has drawn the alarmed attention of the development community—is back from the dead.

The Portland City Council today withdrew a decision to reject the 17-story, 275-unit building known as the Fremont Place Apartments. But the council hasn't yet approved the project either. That vote could come next month.

The latest reversal is an unusual move—one that Commissioner Dan Saltzman said he had not seen in his two decades on the council. Commissioners voted 3 to 2 to undo a preliminary decision where they sided with the Pearl District Neighborhood Association's objections to the building.

Neighbors have objected to the loss of views, some from their own apartments, but asked the council to reject the building for other reasons. Specifically, they pointed to technical grounds that included the accusation they got special treatment from the city's all-volunteer panel that reviews the design of buildings in the central city.

The choice facing the council has drawn interest from the broader development community, in part, because Mayor Ted Wheeler and others at Portland City Hall have pledged to make design review easier.

Instead, with its preliminary decision on March 7, Council had moved in the opposite direction.

The decision to overrule the all-volunteer design commission was itself unusual. It was the first time in a dozen years that Council had moved to overturn the Design Commission and blocked new construction.

Broader issues are at stake: The central city is expected to see double the number of households before 2035 and absorb just under a third of the city's population growth during the same period.

Commissioners Nick Fish, Chloe Eudaly and Mayor Ted Wheeler voted to reopen the discussion. Commissioners Dan Saltzman and Amanda Fritz voted to oppose the decision.

Fish argued in favor of giving the applicant a second shot at addressing council concerns about the design, which included the width of the bike and pedestrian path along the river.

"I believe that in this instance giving the applicant the opportunity to address the concerns we raised and redesign the project and come back to council is in the public interest," said Fish.

Saltzman voted against doing so.

"We had a very good hearing on this," said Saltzman. "I didn't have real strong feelings one way or the other, but I was impressed with the quality of the council discussion on this matter. I was loath to see this council become the design commission. And I'm concerned that's the exactly the door we're opening."

The Daily Journal of Commerce

Portland City Council Reconsiders Fremont Apartments

By Liz Sias

April 4, 2018

Overturing its previous tentative decision to uphold an appeal and deny Lincoln Property Company's proposed 17-story Fremont Apartments project between Northwest Naito Parkway and the Willamette River, the Portland City Council on Wednesday voted to reconsider the application.

As designed by TVA Architects, the proposed structure at 1650 N.W. Naito Parkway would be 306,000 square feet. It would have 275 residential units above 6,600 square feet of ground-floor retail and restaurant space. A parking garage would have 152 spaces.

The project had received the Portland Design Commission's approval in December, but the Pearl District Neighborhood Association appealed that decision and presented its arguments at a public hearing in February. In a tentative vote last month, the City Council upheld that appeal, effectively rejecting the project.

The council's latest vote will continue the hearing until May 10 and reopen the record. The applicant will have until April 11 to submit revisions to its application. City staff will mail notice of the continued hearing and the opportunity to submit testimony in response to revisions. Participants may submit written testimony on the revised plans, and the council will accept oral testimonies on May 10 at 2 p.m.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who voted in favor of reconsidering the project, said he's not concerned about the building's height or its impact on views of the Fremont Bridge. Instead, the main issue he wants to see addressed is the width of the greenway.

Commissioner Chloe Eudaly agreed.

"My primary concern is the greenway and how this building is going to affect our built environment and integrate or not integrate into the community," she said.

However, Commissioners Amanda Fritz and Dan Saltzman voted against the motion to reconsider, arguing that allowing the applicant to submit revisions will set up the city council to act as the city's Design Commission. Fritz said she doesn't think the changes requested are minor and would rather see a new application submitted from scratch.

Ultimately, the motion to reconsider and allow TVA Architects to submit revisions passed with a 3-2 vote.

"I believe that, in this instance, giving the applicant the opportunity to address the concerns we raised and redesign the project and come back to council is in the public interest," Commissioner Nick Fish said.

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Portland Barber School Receives \$40K Grant for Tuition of Low-Income Students

By Simon Gutierrez