

The Portland Tribune

Housing needed: Portland talks downtown homeless solutions

*By Zane Sparling
November 23, 2019*

Portland Downtown, Old Town neighborhood associations meet at First Unitarian, with opening remarks by Ted Wheeler.

As overnight temperatures dropped into the 30s — and Portlanders' concern over homelessness never seemed higher — neighbors from across the central city gathered to understand the issue and work to solve the equation.

Organizers with Portland Downtown Neighborhood Association asked participants to brainstorm "I, We, and They" solutions. Translation? It will take personal sacrifice and community building to end homelessness — not just governmental action.

"Our goal is to improve the quality of life in our downtown and to improve the lives of our homeless neighbors," said David Dickson, co-chair of the association's homelessness team. "Those two things don't have to be incompatible."

But it is a big task. In the last fiscal year, more than 2,820 clean-ups swept through downtown, Old Town, Goose Hollow and the Pearl District, according to data distributed at the meeting from the One Point of Contact campsite reporting system.

The cost was more than \$2.1 million, and workers additionally removed 457,000 needles. In the current fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, there have been 1,017 reported clean-ups.

Yet for many at the community forum, held Saturday, Nov. 23, at First Unitarian church, the solution is obvious: more housing.

"A lack of affordable housing is an issue that we didn't have 20 years ago," said Mary Sipe, who served on the Portland Downtown and Old Town Community Association's joint task force on homelessness.

"I'm really shocked that, as a retired university professor with a decent retirement income, that I can't afford market rate rents in the city of Portland," added Aisha Musa, chair of the Old Town association's safety and livability committee.

Sipe has lived in the Pearl District for 19 years, first as a homeowner, and then after the Great Recession as a renter. The issue has touched her family personally: Her brother with schizophrenia and her 80-year-old mother disappeared and lived an unsheltered life for years.

"I think statistically nobody can deny that there are more people sleeping on the streets than there used to be," Sipe said.

Those in attendance at the meeting included Multnomah County Commissioner Sharon Meieran and county Deputy Health Officer Dr. Jennifer Vines, as well as representatives from Central City Concern, Transition Projects, Harbor of Hope, Street Roots, Portland Police Bureau and panelists who have experienced homelessness.

In an opening address, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler highlighted the city's status as the eighth wealthiest in the nation on a per capita basis. But the prosperity isn't spread equally.

"There's some really big problems here, and people are suffering as a result of those problems," Wheeler told reporters after his speech. "We need to take that anger, that frustration and direct it toward actual strategies that are going to solve the problem."

Wheeler touted as an example the street hygiene pilot, which deploys six portable toilets with attendants in downtown, inner southeast and east Portland.

More recently, City Hall approved Portland Street Response, a new program within the Fire & Rescue bureau that's intended to send first responders and crisis workers to homeless-related calls, rather than a police officer. And PPB announced recently it has finished training 10 public safety support specialists, with two more on the way, who are unarmed but can take official reports in non-emergency situations where there's no suspect information, evidence or a crime scene.

Willamette Week

Portland Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty Forms Group to Endorse Candidates

*By Nigel Jaquiss
November 22, 2019*

Hardesty will use Rise Together to help her issue endorsements and direct campaign contributions.

It's common for elected officials to endorse candidates in other races, but City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, elected with a strong mandate last year, is taking that process to new levels.

Hardesty has formed an initiative called Rise Together, with advisers who include Katrina Holland of the Community Alliance of Tenants, the Rev. LeRoy Haynes of Allen Temple Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and former House Majority Leader Mary Nolan (D-Portland).

Hardesty will use Rise Together to help her issue endorsements and direct campaign contributions.

"We need candidates ready to rise to the challenges of improving our democracy through access, supporting policies that reverse the impacts of climate change, solving the housing crisis with bold and creative ideas, and more," Hardesty said in a statement.

The Portland Mercury

Hall Monitor: Unequal Ground

*By Alex Zielinski
November 22, 2019*

Would solving the biggest hinderance to Portland's inequities be more effective than continuing to micromanage a bunch of smaller ones?

The more I write about Portland politics, the more I'm convinced that many of the city's long-standing inequity issues can be blamed on its wonky form of government.

Take the city's latest equity conversation, which has centered on Portland's majority-white, upper-middle-class neighborhood associations. These neighborhood associations are overseen by seven regional neighborhood coalitions (I know it's confusing, but it's not my fault), which give administrative support and grant money to the neighborhood associations that fall within their boundaries. Coalitions, which are funded by the Office of Community and Civic Life (OCCL), also lobby for their neighborhoods' interests at City Hall.

City staff have struggled to determine if these coalitions are an important piece of the civic engagement process—or if they only serve as one more tool for affluent Portlanders to get City Hall's ear. Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, who oversees the OCCL, recently proposed that, after renewing the coalitions' contracts in June 2020, city staff take the next three years to investigate the actual need for these coalitions.

Unsurprisingly, neighborhood coalitions are alarmed by the city's potential disinvestment in their work, arguing that their erasure could only worsen the city's inequities. That's because, thanks to the odd structure of Portland's government, these coalitions are currently the only city program that represents the needs of people in certain geographic areas.

"We fill the gaps that the city's created through lack of representation," says Tom Griffin-Valade, the founder and former director of North Portland's neighborhood coalition, North Portland Neighborhood Services.

He's referring to Portland's commission form of government—an outdated system in which city commissioners are elected through a citywide vote but aren't expected to represent any specific region of the city. That means most victories go to whoever can afford to mount the most attention-grabbing campaign. And once in office, commissioners aren't necessarily invested in the interests of any one part of the city. Thanks to these inherent flaws, Portland is the only major American city that still relies on this outdated form of government.

"In another city, we would be the office of a district representative," says Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods' Mischa Webley, who supports the recently reignited campaign to replace Portland's system of government. "If you take [neighborhood coalitions] away without changing our form of government, you are negatively impacting any Portlander's ability to have a voice in the system—for better or for worse."

Of course, no one elected Webley—or anyone employed by any neighborhood coalition—to represent their interests in City Hall. It's likely most Portlanders aren't aware of the existence, let alone purpose, of neighborhood coalitions. And it's even more likely that these coalitions aren't fairly representing the needs of their entire community.

Like many of Portland's imperfect policies, neighborhood coalitions were created as a stop-gap solution to the greater injustices written into Portland's core operating rules. It's the same motivation behind the city's attempt to limit campaign donations, the publicly funded elections program, and residential zoning reforms.

In Webley's words: "It's a flawed system, but it's the one that's there."

As Portland attempts to repair decades of underrepresentation through a number of drawn-out, divisive, and piecemeal conversations about specific policies, it's worth taking a more serious look at the city's fundamental government structure—and asking if committing to a single big solution would be more effective than continuing to micromanage a bunch of smaller ones.

The Daily Journal of Commerce

Development plans ascend to new heights

By Chuck Slothower

November 22, 2019

The Portland Design Commission has delayed making a decision on a proposal for a 23-story hotel and multifamily project that has raised opposition from neighbors in the Pearl District.

The design by Otak Inc. has improved from earlier iterations, design commissioners said. But they opted not to take a vote at a Thursday hearing, leaving the record open for more written testimony.

The proposed tower would be the first in the Pearl District under Central City 2035 zoning that raised height limits. The developers plan to use the full height limit, with bonuses, of 250 feet – an increase from the previous limit of 175 feet.

Neighbors have objected to the height and bulk of the Hyatt Place design. The building would be constructed on a quarter-block lot at Northwest 12th Avenue and Flanders Street.

“The central problem here is there is too much mass and too much height and it is not contextually appropriate,” said Carrie Richter, a land use attorney representing the Pearl Neighbors for Integrity in Design, a community group that has challenged tall building projects in the area. PNID is distinct from the city-recognized neighborhood association.

The Hyatt Place project comes from a development team of Seattle developer Vibrant Cities and The Sunray Companies of Madison, Mississippi.

The 197,118-square-foot building would hold 160 hotel rooms on floors two through 11, and 113 studio and one-bedroom units on floors 12 through 23. The project was valued at \$66 million by the city’s Bureau of Development Services.

Otak’s Gary Larson said the design team had used setbacks and other architectural moves to reduce the apparent mass.

“We have created a dynamism here with also the goal of bringing the height of the building into the context of the neighborhood,” he said.

Richter told design commissioners that they should follow the previous zoning rules because the Central City 2035 plan was remanded in August by the state Land Use Board of Appeals. The city lacked a factual basis for the height limits, LUBA said.

“The tallest building that you can approve is 175 feet,” Richter said.

City officials said they would follow the 250-foot height limit, which has been declared effective but not formally “acknowledged” – the final step of approval by the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development.

Architectural changes made since previous meetings with design commissioners won praise. Reza Farhoodi, a resident representing the Pearl District Neighborhood Association, said the design appeared “more cohesive.”

“This project will set a precedent for height in the Pearl District neighborhood, so it’s important to get the design details right,” he said.

Design commissioners said a required water feature was better integrated into the ground floor façade. They also praised the stouter appearance of the building's base, which was criticized in earlier designs as too weak.

"The base-middle-top expression is a clear improvement over earlier expressions," Commissioner Brian McCarter said.

McCarter, however, voiced one significant concern.

"My one disappointment is urban street trees," he said. "It really bothers me in a quarter-block building that we've set a precedent for one street tree in a hundred feet. ... To have a single tree in a hundred feet, it seems like we've got to do better than that."

The project team will return before the Design Commission for final deliberations and a decision on Jan. 9.

OPB

Forum On Homelessness Solutions In Portland Brings Together More Than 100 People

*By Meerah Powell
November 23, 2019*

About 180 people, including Mayor Ted Wheeler, attended an educational forum Saturday focused on seeking solutions related to homelessness in downtown Portland.

The forum was organized by Portland's Downtown Neighborhood Association and included panels focused on mental health, addiction and public safety.

It was attended by downtown homeowners, renters, employees, business owners and people who have experienced homelessness.

Wheeler gave the opening address, touching on some of the things the city and Multnomah County have done to assist people experiencing homelessness — such as homeless prevention services through the Joint Office of Homeless Services.

"This is my top priority, full stop. It is what I spend the majority of my time on. It is what I think about all of the time," Wheeler said. "We have spent considerable resources. We have innovated in many new ways. We have built new partnerships. We have tried new strategies, and I am very proud of the work that we have done."

Wheeler also touched on Portland Street Response, a program recently approved by Portland City Council that will designate people trained in mental and behavioral health to respond to low-priority calls including people experiencing homelessness.

"In addition to that, we have greatly expanded, in fact we have provided record levels of affordable housing," Wheeler said. "And the frontier for that, the next step, is supportive housing, where to get the most chronically homeless off of our streets, we not only put them in housing, but we also provide them the services they need in that housing in order to stay in that housing and be successful in that housing."

Those services could be anywhere from addiction services to job training, he said.

"We're working hard already to achieve those objectives," Wheeler said.

Stephanie Hansen, a member of the board of directors of the Portland Downtown Neighborhood Association, also spoke at the forum, specifically about her experiences as someone who had formerly experienced homelessness downtown.

Wheeler called her an example of a “success story.”

Hansen was living and working in Portland’s Hollywood District until she was diagnosed with cancer and lost her job. She was living in subsidized housing, but periodically failed housing inspections due to chronic depression.

“I was couch-surfing, I was sleeping outside. I spent several nights sleeping in hospital emergency rooms,” Hansen said.

She eventually got into Jean’s Place, a transitional housing shelter ran by the nonprofit Transition Projects.

After her time in Jean’s Place, Transition Projects helped Hansen find housing downtown.

“They paid my rent and utilities for a little over two years until I had an income and could take that over myself,” Hansen said. “Now I pay my own rent and utilities and spend my time trying to give back.”

“Even now, I still worry about my housing,” she said. “There’s not enough affordable housing. I’ve gone through two rent increases in the unit I’m at, and if those continue, I will be priced out.”

She encouraged the forum attendees to brainstorm solutions to help both the housed and unhoused communities in Portland.

Organizers for the forum said the event is the first step for the Downtown Neighborhood Association’s housing task force to understand and develop solutions for the area.

“First we need to understand the issue as fully and as comprehensively as we can,” said Darlene Urban Garrett, with the Association. “Consider a Portland five years in the future where we have solved our homelessness problem. Think about that — what have we done to do that? What should we be doing to make that happen? What can we do as a community?”

“One thing we know for sure is that it will take all of us,” she said. “This is not a problem just for the city or our nonprofit service providers to solve. We are all in this together.”