

Drazan: Declare state of emergency for homeless crisis

GOP gubernatorial candidate unveils campaign issue roadmap

By **CLAIRE RUSH**
The Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND — The Republican candidate for governor, Christine Drazan, on Monday, Aug. 8, called for declaring a state of emergency on homelessness in Oregon as she seeks to distinguish herself in a three-way race.

Drazan's unveiling of her state of emergency proposal was included in a campaign issue roadmap. Much of the plan released Aug. 8 contains points the former Oregon state representative and House minority leader has discussed before, like repealing Measure 110, the 2020 ballot measure that decriminalized possession of small amounts of hard drugs including methamphetamine and heroin.

Drazan named homelessness as a top priority in her campaign and said declaring a state of emergency would allow for bureaucratic "barriers to be broken down so that people can begin to work together more effectively."

"We have the opportunity right now with a lot of different stakeholders who are throwing a lot of money at this problem," Drazan told The Associated Press. "But



The Observer, File

The Republican candidate for governor, Christine Drazan, on Monday, Aug. 8, 2022, called for declaring a state of emergency on homelessness in Oregon as she seeks to distinguish herself in a three-way race.

what we're missing is really a central point of focus and leadership that can coalesce all those efforts."

Drazan's campaign said the emergency declaration would "accelerate the rollout of addiction and behavioral health supports and provide additional funding as needed."

Drazan's release makes no mention of abortion. The issue has become a potential liability for GOP candidates following the Supreme Court's decision to remove constitutional abortion protections by overturning Roe v. Wade. A majority of Oregon voters favor abortion rights and Drazan is pro-life.

Drazan is among three gubernatorial candidates on Oregon's November ballot. She is running against the Democrat Tina Kotek, a former state House speaker, and the unaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson. Johnson served as a Democratic lawmaker in the state house and senate from 2000 to 2021 before resigning and leaving the party to run as an independent.

Wrestling with homelessness

Grappling with intersecting housing and homelessness crises, Oregon lawmakers earlier this year

approved a budget that includes \$400 million to address both issues amidst a growing number of people without housing across the state.

Portland declared a state of emergency on homelessness in 2015 and has extended it five times since then. The measure, now set to expire in 2025, reduces the bureaucratic red tape surrounding the creation of homeless shelters.

Despite the city's years-long emergency measure, the estimated number of people experiencing homelessness spiked 25% in the Portland area between 2020 and 2022, according to point-in-time counts reported to The Department of Housing and Urban Development. Further south on the California state line, largely rural Jackson County reported an increase of 72% during the same period.

Oregon's homelessness crisis has been fueled by a housing shortage, the coronavirus pandemic and the highest drug addiction rate of any state in the nation. Federal data from the latest National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that 9% of teens and adults in Oregon had illicit drug use disorders in 2020.

The state has wrestled

with a debate over the best way to reduce homelessness. Some business groups have called for more encampment sweeps and stricter enforcement of anti-camping ordinances, while others want more investment in social services and affordable housing.

"We have to provide flexibility in shelter space, we have to provide the right kinds of shelter space based on the populations we have out there," Drazan said. "We can't give up on anybody and we cannot allow this to continue."

Homelessness and housing are also top issues for the two other candidates in Oregon's gubernatorial race.

Candidates' stance

Kotek, the Democratic candidate, has said she would form a special emergency management team to work on the issues, in addition to issuing an executive order on her first day

in office to create a 10-year plan to build more homes in urban, suburban and rural areas.

In 2020, while serving as speaker in the Oregon House, Kotek also called for a statewide emergency declaration for homelessness. Drazan was the House Republican minority leader at the time during a short session that was adjourned early and marred by political tensions after Republicans in the House and Senate staged a walkout to protest a climate change measure.

Kotek's campaign described Drazan's state of emergency proposal as a "stunning reversal."

"Instead of helping find solutions to the housing and homelessness crisis, she pushed her caucus to flee the state and kill nearly every bill that was introduced, including bills on homelessness," said Katie Wertheimer, communications director for Kotek's campaign.

Johnson, the independent candidate, has called for creating more designated camping areas and emergency shelters. Like Drazan, Johnson supports repealing Measure 110, which decriminalized possession of small amounts of hard drugs.

"I will end the tent cities," Johnson said in an email in response to Drazan's proposals. "We don't need more plans. We need action from a new governor who's going to get stuff done."

Oregon is a blue state largely known for the liberal city of Portland. But vast swaths of it are rural and conservative, and registered unaffiliated voters outnumber both Democratic and Republican voters, according to the latest data from the Oregon Secretary of State.

Drazan is hoping to become Oregon's first Republican governor since 1987, as the GOP seeks to capitalize on soaring inflation and dissatisfaction with the party in power.



Drazan



Kotek



Johnson

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