

EDITORIAL

County has to make the tough calls

Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler has made some bold moves with the release of the 2010 Fiscal Year proposed budget. Wheeler has made it a priority to save many of the social-service programs for people experiencing homelessness and poverty that have no funding stream other than the county.

The county is facing nearly a \$42 million dollar shortfall. It's not pretty. The budget would slice 214 staff positions – either by laying people off or not filling vacancies. Other services hit hard in the proposed budget include both the Sheriff and the District Attorney's offices – both of which will be overwhelmed

regardless of budget outcomes.

Much more so if Wheeler doesn't draw a line in the sand and help fund basic services like drug and alcohol treatment, housing and mental health services – all of which are being gutted at the state level.

It's not a greedy grab by the county, but instead, a smart investment into a sustainable revenue stream for our community.

If basic services for poor folks are drained the streets will become more violent, plain and simple. Harm reduction models that have proven so successful over the past decade will be replaced with harsher prison sentences and more jail beds. This is not the answer.

We commend the county and their employees, along with the unions, for being able to work on these important issues and create a not-so-perfect solution – but one that we as a community are going to have to live with and get through.

Multnomah County is now moving forward with a motor vehicle tax increase that would raise a rental car tax from 12.5 percent to 17 percent – generating up to \$6 million more for vital services in Portland and Gresham.

The addition money raised through the rental car tax would go to the county's general fund – allowing commissioners to allocate money to specific services needed in the region.

The tax will face stiff resistance from the tourism industry, but the reality is without a sales tax, the rental car tax is one of the only sources of revenue we can create for individuals and families who visit our great city. The increase from 12 to 17 percent still doesn't put Portland in the top 10 around the country for the amount charged to visitors accessing rental cars. It's not a greedy grab by the county, but instead, a smart investment into a sustainable revenue stream for our community.

Proposals to cut funding for projects are often framed in isolation – a million here, a million there. But what is often overlooked is the consequence to the entire network that relies on all it's parts operating at a functional level for each element to reach success. The county's obligations in securing services – including addiction treatment, mental health assistance and employment training – is a critical component of the city's and the county's efforts to create supportive housing and ending homelessness.

If Ted Wheeler and the other commissioners can hold the line on social services in the 2010 budget and push through the rental car tax, it will go a long way to creating the stability needed during these hard economic times – not just for poor folk, but for the entire community. But it's a long way from here to there when you're talking about budgets.

STREET ROOTS' EDITORIAL BOARD

The views expressed in the editorials in Street Roots are the consensus of members of the editorial board and contributing volunteers.

Alternative spring break leaves impressions

BY SARAH HOPE VALENTINE

During the week of March 23-27, a group of 12 Linfield students and their advisor participated in Alternative Spring Break program. They volunteered with several different homeless providers, as well as met with representatives from Central City Concern and the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness. It was a fantastic week of learning about the issues involved with homelessness and talking with different members of the homeless community. The group would like to thank the following organizations for welcoming them, educating them, and letting them volunteer during the week: Blanchet House, Downtown Chapel, Sisters of the Road and CAG, Goose Hollow Family Shelter, Transitional Youth, and Operation Nightwatch, as well as Sean Hubert and Ben Gates from Central City Concern, Ryan Deibert, the Program Coordinator for the Ending Homeless Initiative with the city of Portland, and Kate Allen, the Housing Policy Manager for the city of Portland. The following are statements from members of the group on the experience.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Street Roots encourages readers to submit letters and columns for publication. Letters to the editor may be submitted to the Street Roots office, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, faxed to 503-227-3117 or e-mailed to streetroots@email.com. Please address your submissions as letters to the editor.

"Immersed in an unfamiliar atmosphere, I felt nervous – maybe even slightly scared. Partly because of the stereotypes I had of the homeless, but also because I didn't know what to expect. But by the end of the week, my eyes, heart, and mind were opened to the true reality and condition of what homelessness is. No matter what you wear, where you live (or don't live), how much – or little – you have, I realized that we are all humans with a mind that can think and a heart that can feel. A week of service created a lifetime goal to help those who are ignored, defeated, and suppressed get the rights they deserve as human beings

– Pao Abulencia

"I think the overall lesson of the week was that everyone has a story that deserves to be heard. We must open our minds and hearts to these stories, and love people for who they are. The intensely close-knit Portland street community that our Alternative Spring Break group was allowed to be a part of showed me how much love there is in the world. Thank you to everyone we met or worked with during the week." – Aila Wallace

"People always told me that the homeless were dangerous and that they just wanted to steal my money. I used to walk past them on the street, eyes staring straight ahead and deaf to their quiet requests. During our ASB trip, I learned that the homeless are people with stories and feelings and needs just like mine. I don't think I will ever just 'walk past' a homeless person again."

– Rachel Mills

"What I learned most from the week is that 'home' does not only mean shelter or house. It can mean having company, good health, peace of mind, a community, and all combinations of these things. Thank you everyone who made us feel at home within your community!"

– Renata Tirta

"The very fact that Street Roots has been in circulation for 10 years speaks to the growing voice of homeless issues into public discussion. It has been a sorely underrepresented voice."

– Andy Williams

"Lot's of the people I met, I really had a great time with. This is such a week in where you learn things about yourself and the world around you, you couldn't have experienced anywhere else, which is of course, invaluable. At times this was of course challenging and not easy, but in the end it was all worth it. We learned about poverty, homelessness and all those things we like to close our eyes for but can't be ignored. Volunteering is a lot more fun than you think; I liked this spring break as much as my previous ones when I didn't do volunteer work."

– Victor Vodegel

"The first thing I felt as soon as we set out into the streets was an overwhelmingly surreal detachment. For me, there was something disconcertingly normal about trying to finish the scavenger hunt, seeking out the different social services on offer in NW Portland, as if it hadn't quite sunk in just what exactly it was I was doing, or how differently I was already behaving. It wouldn't be until our first evening that anything really quite registered on a gut level. The whole week had that kind of feel, seeing all the striking contrasts, juxtapositions, and unexpectedly contradicted expectations. ... One image that really struck me and stuck with me from the first day, was that Sisters of the Road Café and the trendy nightclub next to it are separated by nothing more than a four-inch drain pipe, and yet the two worlds they represent couldn't be more different, nor more disconnected from each other. Two weeks later, I'm still a long way from being able to really process it all – but I already have a sense of how much that week has changed me. I feel more open to the world than I did before, more conscious of how my brain stereotypes things and tunes things out, and even more optimistic, more hopeful, about my own ability to do good in the world."

– Eric Butler

"I remember Friday night, our last night in Portland, walking through Old Town/ Chinatown and seeing the juxtaposition between Friday night life and the rest of the week. There were people all over the streets, and they were standing in line, but they wore heels, skirts, suits – they were hitting the clubs. This contrasted sharply in my mind to the entire week of seeing other people – homeless people – standing in line for food or laundry vouchers or TB cards. I asked someone I was with if it was weird that I would feel way more comfortable standing in those lines, talking to those people, then going into any of the clubs we walked past. This week has re-cemented my lifetime goal of helping those less fortunate than myself, of living for something greater than myself, and of loving people, no matter their ethnicity, gender, or social status."

– Sarah Hope Valentine

"My experience over Spring Break working with the homeless solidified my belief in humanity and positive interactions. Everyone that I interacted with over the week, homeless or not, received my efforts and intentions with a smile."

– Duncan Reid

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