VISIONS, from page 1

Education Project spoke of receiving a VIA grant and being invited to City Hall.

"For the first time, day laborers participated in a conversation at City Hall," Sosa said. "It started a dialogue where we were able to talk to people who saw us as a menace and show them that we are human beings."

The testimony served as evidence that the massive VisionPDX process – which collected the input of nearly 17,000 Portlanders about their vision for the Rose City in 2030 – had achieved one of its stated goals: "To open up government to all Portlanders, particularly to underrepresented groups and communities."

Despite the waves of testimonies, the city has determined that the program will no longer be a city-funded iniative.

Not all is lost for VIA, however. The Regional Research Institute for Human Services at Portland State University's School of Social Work has agreed to both house VIA and be the program's fiscal sponsor. The move, effective June 30, is unexpected but not without precedent, said Stephanie Stephens, VIA's program manager.

"VisionPDX worked with the Survey Research Lab at PSU on data for the project," said Stephens, "and [faculty members] from PSU were really key people in VisionPDX. It seemed like a logical place [for VIA] so when they stepped up we said, 'great!'"

Stephens said that "when Council passed the VIA resolution in 2008, it specified that the organization would be independent from the city within three years. We will be soon, but nobody expected it to happen so quickly."

Despite their excitement about VIA's continuation at PSU, some VIA grantees still feel abandoned by City Hall, marking an ironic end to a relationship that began with community groups feeling embraced and accepted by their local leaders.

Mardine Mao, president of the Cambodian American Community of Oregon (CACO) and a 2008 VIA grantee, said it was "painful to hear" of VIA's elimination from the Mayor's proposed budget.

"To eliminate the program completely, breaks the trust with the community," said Mao. "If they just made a cut to it, I could understand, but ...now there's a disconnect, it seems like they [City Hall] don't believe in the vision."

Mao, who worked with her CACO colleagues to create an oral history project that connects Cambodian-American youth to their parents' stories of surviving the deadly Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, said that the VIA grant helped her community to heal.

"These stories needed to be heard," said Mao. "A lot of our community suffers because of our history and what we've been through. Some have witnessed executions and family deaths, and it's very traumatizing for some individuals. It's also harder for them to communicate. But this oral history allows them to engage the youth and help them really understand. It brings the family closer.

"To see a teenage boy break down and cry because of hearing his mom's story – for the first time in his life – is very powerful," Mao added. "It kind of humanized the adults to the youth."

For a generation of Cambodians who fled a murderous regime, trust in government does not come easily.

"We've developed a mentality of not trusting leaders," said Mao, "so for us to be able to get $10,000 from the city ... kind of restored our faith in government and politics. We owe our gratitude to the city for believing in us."

At the same time, however, Mao is dismayed by the city's decision to cease funding for VIA.

"I realize we're in tough economic times, but I didn't think this whole program would be streamlined," Mao said. "I think the city didn't really understand what the project meant to us."

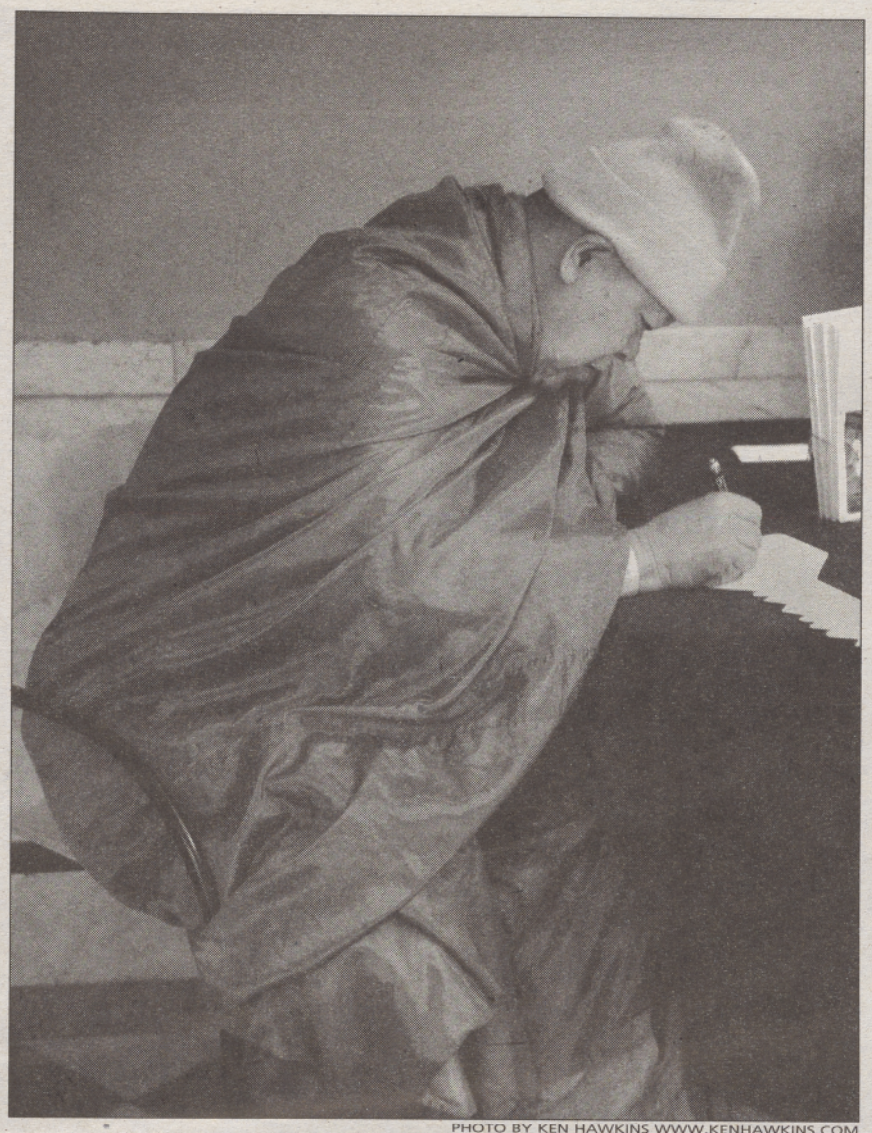

PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS WWW.KENHAWKINS.COM

A supporter of the Visions in Action program signs a card to display in a rally for the program. The city cut funding for Visions in Action this month for the short-lived porgram that was widely popular among participants.

Laurie Powers, the executive director of PSU's Regional Research Institute, has been in contact with VIA staffers since last fall, when School of Social Work faculty member Bowen McBeath was working with VIA on a grant application. Powers met with McBeath, Stephens and VIA staffer Cassie Cohen to learn more about the program, and "it gave me opportunity to get to know the initiative and appreciate its importance in the community," Powers said.

"When we heard that VIA wasn't going to be funded," Powers continued, "we stepped up to provide them space and support, and look for opportunities to partner with them on future grants. (The Regional Research Institute) is providing a bridge for VIA to maintain some identity and activity through this period until they can establish themselves as an independent organization."

While the institute will provide VIA with office space, a computer and phone, and access to all of PSU's facilities, "we're funded by grants ourselves, so we can't really control what money will go to VIA," said Powers. "[Fiscal sponsorship] just means that the City is willing to transfer the dollars left over for VIA to (the institute) and allowing them to realize those funds." In other words, fiscal sponsorship does not equal steady funding for VIA.

VIA has between $30,000-$40,000 in savings left over from its current fiscal year budget which can be transferred to the institute and used as the program transitions out of the city's jurisdiction. Stephens admits, however, that despite the PSU partnership VIA's future is still uncertain.

"It remains to be seen," said Stephens. "The coalition now has to really think about what to do as a group."

Stephens and fellow VIA staff members will lose their jobs, but pledge to remain involved with VIA's evolution without pay.

"When I took this job, I wasn't looking; I had a job that I loved," Stephens recalled. "But I really felt strongly about VIA, and as part of VisionPDX I had seen the work on the ground and seen what a difference it has made in the community. I'm not going to stop now."

While VIA will no longer be funded by the city, the Office of Human Relations would be funded permanently, Mayor Sam Adams said. Created in 2008, the office works on civil and human rights issues, and houses the city's Human Rights Commission.

"We will have a continued focus on increasing diversity of public outlook and input," Adams said.

LATINO OBAMA from page 10

the first two," says René Vega, a retired soldier. That's plainly not true, but the government has introduced free education and medical care.

More than 100,000 subsidized houses have been built. The minimum wage was increased by 15 per cent and benefit payments to the poor doubled from $15 to $30 a month (the Ecuadorian currency adopted the U.S. dollar in 2000). "They call it 21st century socialism," says Carol Murillo, deputy director of the government-run newspaper El Telegrafo. "It's really normal capitalism with wider social program."

In Ecuador's hospitals, the problems go back years. "Under (former president) Lucio Gutiérrez, we'd ask for new equipment time after time. And they'd always say that it was on its way. But there was no budget: if a doctor died, no one was hired to replace him. At first we got angry, then we just resigned ourselves to it," says Manuel Jimenez, a gynecologist in the Amazon region.

A colleague adds: "They'd increase our salaries, but we didn't have the tools to do our work."

Little surprise, then, that the inauguration of new facilities at their hospital ends with cries of "Viva Correa!" Had the equipment arrived a month earlier, one doctor observes, it would have saved several lives. Getting stuff done in Ecuador requires more than just political will. All too often it requires leadership right from the top, and Correa is a known micro-manager. It's not always pretty – ministers reportedly leave his office in tears, while the press is moved out of hearing range of his tirades – but it is done with an unusual competence.

Even a World Bank official, whose boss has been kicked out of the country by Correa, has praise for the president. "The IMF's been recommending for 20 years that there should be a single treasury account (to help planning). Which president goes and does it? Correa." That's probably an endorsement a nationalist leader could do without.

Correa has also communicated better than any previous president what he's doing and why. On Saturday mornings he hosts a lengthy radio show and he's prone to dashing around the country in one of the Ecuadorian army's very few helicopters. Nearly 40 percent of Ecuador's population live in poverty, and income distribution remains appallingly unequal.

The one social group solidly against him is the upper-middle class, particularly in the economic powerhouse of Guayaquil. They object not only to taxes on the rich to pay for social services, but also to the centralization of power by the president.

The old political elite may have been rotten, but can one arrogant man replace it? Nor is everyone on the left happy. One of Correa's initial allies, Alberto Acosta, left the government over its insistence on promoting mining in some of the country's most biodiverse areas.

"Some members of the government think that, with a higher oil price, the economic problems will go away. They won't," he says. "We have to go beyond a model of just extracting resources."

Correa sometimes seems more interested in punishing U.S. companies than in ensuring environmental damage doesn't recur. Communities have lost the right to block extraction of oil and other resources, as the government looks hungrily for revenues for its social spending.

Now the head of Ecuador's leading environmental NGO, Ivonne Ramos, predicts "high levels of social conflict" as the government tries to push through mining projects. Mining captures Correa's complicated relationship with the country's indigenous population.

On the one hand, he has shown respect for indigenous symbolism. On the other, he has sought to discredit the indigenous leaders – satirised as golden ponchos – for tolerating the neo-liberal reforms of previous governments.

Meanwhile, as higher food prices pinch, there is some nostalgia for past presidents. In the cities, unemployment is rising. Hundreds of workers head out onto the pavements at dawn, hoping that someone will pick them up for a day's labour. "It must be the president's fault," says one, an out-of-luck plumber.

So will it all end in disillusion? "That's happened before because of Ecuador's structural condition as a place of instability and inequality," says pollster Pérez. There's little doubt that Ecuadorians make a demanding electorate.

One watch-repairer – a member of Correa's party – told me in all seriousness that the president could count on his vote only if he personally listened to a complaint about a motoring fine and came to a performance of his music group.

For the moment, however, no Ecuadorian president has been as ambitious or as popular as Correa. Revolution or not, it is his to throw away.