

## Building a bigger tent



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

*Nick Fish leads a team to Seattle to explore options and opportunities for the tough times ahead*

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Earlier this month, Street Roots joined Portland Housing Commissioner Nick Fish on a two-day trip with city and county representatives, the Portland Business Alliance, the Enterprise Foundation and non-profit leaders to look at resource development and best practices for housing and homeless services in Seattle.

As the commissioner in charge of both housing and parks, Fish oversees two bureaus that impact nearly every resident of the city, particularly its most vulnerable populations as they interface with business, neighborhood and development concerns.

Under Fish, the Portland Housing Bureau has undergone enormous changes in the past two years, including a merger of the Bureau of Housing and Community Development and a segment of the Portland Development Commission – with the idea of centralizing and streamlining services for affordable housing projects and homeless services.

The agency also created a new strategic plan with citywide stakeholders and has made a concerted effort to change the way the bureau communicates with the broader public and has even hired a public relations manager.

The bureau recently submitted its budget request for the fiscal year beginning July 1. While the bureau has consolidated its resources to deliver on a number of big projects in the past two years, including the development of veterans housing in South Waterfront, the building of the new Resource Access Center, and myriad other smaller projects – the bureau is projecting a revenue decline this year of about \$16 million, mostly due to the decline in tax increment

finance funds due to the slowing of the economy.

Also missing in this year's budget are one-time stimulus funds provided by the federal government that provided important rent assistance dollars for the 10-year plan to end homelessness. Another concern is that federal homeless dollars in the form of Community Development Block Grants will be cut to Portland, which could mean drastic cuts for some of Portland's most crucial homeless services providers. (See page 4 for a breakdown of proposed federal cuts and the SR editorial on the issue on page 15)

The projected decline in revenue and uncertainty on the federal front has forced the housing bureau to quietly cut its staff. Come this July, the bureau will have laid off 17 employees over the past two years.

Despite the lagging economy and projected revenue declines, Fish and his housing team seem upbeat and aggressive – knowing that they can't rest on the laurels of past success and realizing the hard work that lay ahead.

Street Roots had the chance to sit down with Fish over breakfast while in Seattle to talk about the trip and the environment around homeless and housing services.

**Israel Bayer:** *Your thoughts on Seattle so far?*

**Nick Fish:** I have been impressed. The comprehensive view of delivering services, the "housing first" model, and what appears to be a fairly strong support for affordable housing in Seattle reminds us we're not alone. It's inspiring because it appears that both Portland and Seattle have a similar philosophy that guides the work. Of course, there are some differences here and there, but by and large the dedication to long-term strategies and the willingness to

take some risks are there.

**I.B.:** *Concerning the environment and transportation, the Pacific Northwest has become a national model for sustainability and urban planning. Can we create a culture where housing is a part of this conversation?*

**N.F.:** Yes. Portland is pushing the envelope by implementing long-term, cost effective solutions to end homelessness and provide homes for those most in need. Sustainability is core to this work, because I believe that low-income families should enjoy access to healthy living environments just like the rest of us. Bud Clark Commons will be a LEED Platinum building. Block 49 in South Waterfront will be on the new streetcar line. The Ramona is a LEED gold building and a showcase for energy efficient practices.

Portland has a great opportunity to be a national showcase for the Department of Housing and Urban Development's new vision of sustainable communities – blending transportation choices, affordable housing and sustainability. Our residents of modest means can really benefit when we make sure they have access to affordable, quality homes that are close to good schools, grocery stores and bus service.

**I.B.:** *The Portland Housing Bureau has undergone some enormous changes, including the merger between the Portland Development Commission and the Bureau of Housing and Community Development and creating a strategic plan. Can you talk a little bit about this process and your vision for the bureau?*

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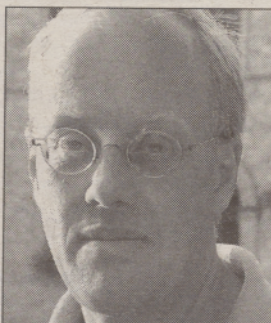
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