

BUILDING from page 1

N.F.: It has been a challenging two years. Advocates talked about the need for change for over a decade. In my first year on Council, the Mayor and I acted to bring all the city's housing programs and resources under one roof.

I am very proud of the work of Director Margaret Van Vliet and her dedicated team at PHB. They have worked hard to restructure the city's housing delivery system and to weather this economic storm.

Looking forward, with a stronger foundation, we need to address the challenges on the horizon: developing a new sustainable funding source, addressing equity, fighting for our fair share of federal and state dollars, and strengthening our partnerships.

I.B.: *While the city has put together several major projects for affordable housing in the past two years, it's also facing a major revenue decline through tax-increment financing (a major source of affordable housing funding) of up to \$16 million. How does the city meet the challenges in the years to come?*

N.F.: We need to continue to invest in long term, cost effective strategies to meet the needs of all Portlanders. But the TIF cliff — the decline in available TIF resources — is real. In the future, we must develop sustainable and flexible resources beyond our federal entitlements and TIF. Our trip to Seattle was a first step in our plan to lead on this issue.

I.B.: *Your thoughts on the legislative session in Salem related to homelessness and housing?*

N.F.: We don't have a clear sense of the magnitude of cuts, and how they will affect our partners. The city is less dependent on state revenue, but because the city and the county are so closely aligned on human services — when the county takes a hit, the city feels the pressure to step up and help backfill some of those cuts. There's no question the outcomes may leave big holes in our safety net.

I was down in Salem a couple of weeks ago testifying to renew our tax investment program, and make sure that we continue to have this tool at our disposal for housing. There's also a team of people from the city pushing the housing agenda in Salem.

I.B.: *What does the tax investment program look like?*

N.F.: It allows us to give a developer a 10-year property tax break if they meet certain policy goals that include building housing units that are affordable. It comes with a wrinkle — we ask that the law be clarified to allow us to extend the abatement to the commercial portion of the building if it meets a clear public benefit. Both County Chair Jeff Cogen, and I testified about the program. An example of a mixed-use development

that would qualify in a place like the Lents neighborhood or East Portland is where a developer would also like to include a grocery store in what we call a food desert (where a grocery store doesn't exist in the neighborhood). It's the goal to extend the abatement to bring people both housing, and things like a grocery store to neighborhoods that have been traditionally underserved. We're cautiously optimistic.

The reality is we need as many tools in the toolbox as possible. We have to be able to use tax abatement, tax credits, and direct subsidy along with other tools to fund affordable housing. At the end of the day,

Seattle's approach has much to offer Portland leaders

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Knowing Portland can't reinvent the wheel concerning resource development for homeless and housing dollars, Commissioner Nick Fish led a team of housing experts and

business representatives to Seattle on a two-day trip to look at models surrounding harm reduction and a housing levy.

On March 3 the group visited the Downtown Emergency Service Center, or DESC, an organization with a long track record of working with people with mental health and addictive illness. The group spent several hours with DESC Executive Director Bill Hobson talking about the organization's approach at working with individuals with chronic alcohol and drug addictions through a harm reduction model.

The group toured the controversial, yet successful 1811 Eastlake Building — where DESC houses 75 homeless men and women with chronic alcohol and addiction issues who are the heaviest users of publicly funded crisis services, such as emergency rooms, jails and long-

term programs.

Dobson told the group that the only real rules here are being nice to one another, as we walked through the building where an older gentlemen sat and drank a Busch Light in the day space. "If you can do that, you'll be fine," says Dobson.

The idea of offering a facility where people can openly drink is not new in the harm reduction world, but it is the first of its kind in the United States.

Dobson was peppered with questions from the group ranging from service delivery approaches and funding mechanisms to how DESC built the political will to create such a facility in Seattle. Dobson's response was building non-traditional allies with law enforcement, the business community, and advocates. "If you have these different groups bought into the idea, the entire community will take pause, and listen."

The group also toured the Morrison Building in the heart of Seattle's downtown, where DESC operates a 190-unit housing center on top of a shelter that houses more than 200 women and men. The facility also offers additional beds meant for individuals specifically being discharged from the hospital, or in extreme distress. The shelter is open 24-hours a day, seven days a week. In many ways the Morrison Building is like the Resource Access Center that will open in June in downtown Portland, except older and bigger.

The afternoon was spent in two separate in-depth meetings with the Medina Foundation Executive Director Adrienne Quinn, and former Deputy Mayor and Philanthropy NW CEO Tom Byers, who talked to the group about

the housing tax abatement doesn't have a big impact on the state revenues, but does allow cities and counties to help create an incentive for housing.

I.B.: *What about the federal cuts we've been hearing about?*

N.F.: Honestly, this concerns me the most. We are looking at potential cuts to the Community Development Block Grant program. It's an important piece of the funding puzzle for housing. The dollars are reasonably flexible, and can be used for many different projects. Unfortunately, the

President has proposed a cut to the program and the Republicans have come along and said let's double those cuts. We're at wits ends trying to figure out what's real, and what's not. It's been keeping me awake at night trying to figure it out. Think the Admiral Building, and the Martha Washington Building, it's one of the most crucial tools we have for preserving affordable housing.

The Portland community, and advocates like yourself and the city are a part of national coalitions and other groups that are doing everything possible to move the housing agenda forward. We simply can't balance our budgets on the backs of the poor. We'll see how that shakes out in Washington, and in Salem. I'm extremely proud in Portland that we have wall-to-wall support for housing, but we can't do it alone. We have to be on high alert and active.

I.B.: *One of the themes we heard from foundations and advocates this week is that if*

the housing agenda locally, and around the country is to move forward, we have to be working in collaboration with non-traditional allies. It's something Street Roots has taken very seriously over the past two-years, and taken a hard look in the mirror and asked ourselves, how do we honestly build a movement — what's your take on this?

N.F.: At one time I worked for (Massachusetts Congressman) Barney Frank — one of the biggest housing advocates of our time. When I was running for office he came out and spoke to a group of supporters on my behalf.

He said, two of his best allies in moving the affordable housing agenda forward were the home builders and the real estate industry.

There were some progressive housing folks in the room that looked as though they had just swallowed the cat. At the same time, the idea that the most powerful Democrat in Washington was working on housing issues had identified home builders and the real estate industry as real allies was very sobering for others.

The reality is to be successful on the housing front, locally and at the state level we need a big coalition. Part of this is about the confidence and maturity of a movement, and its willingness to build a big tent.

Bill Hobson (executive director of Seattle's Downtown Emergency Service Center) said it yesterday. His biggest allies on the most controversial form of harm reduction and housing programs ended up being the business community, and law enforcement. We've heard this week that it doesn't matter what people's motivations are. For the police, it may be that they are stretched thin and don't have the capacity to respond to calls surrounding homelessness. For the business community, maybe they didn't feel like it was productive for the retail community to have people sleeping on the streets in front of their businesses. I honestly don't care how you get to our

building the political will and inner workings of Seattle's housing levy.

The Seattle Housing Levy passed in 2009 by more than 60 percent by Seattle voters. The levy has dedicated nearly \$145 million dollars to capital housing projects and rent-assistance over a seven-year period. The cost to Seattle households is roughly \$65 a year, or \$5.40 a month.

Much of the conversation about the housing levy was off the record, but representatives from the city and county, and the Portland Business Alliance all had questions and lively conversations about the challenges of such a move in Portland.

Dinner was spent at FareStart — an impressive culinary program/restaurant that trains people experiencing homelessness and disadvantaged individuals. In attendance were representatives from Housing and Urban Development, the Gates and Medina Foundations and Enterprise.

The theme of the night was building a broader partnership around housing in the Pacific Northwest, and how Portland can both learn from Seattle and work with larger foundations to have a role in funding homeless and affordable housing projects in the Portland region.

On March 4 the group met with housing levy advocates, and city administrators for a two-hour session hosted by Key Bank in downtown before taking a tour of the Seattle Housing Authority. The meeting about the housing levy on the second day was off the record. The conversation entailed an A to Z presentation on the Seattle Housing Levy along with two hours of questions and answers.

movement — I just need you at the table helping. We have spent too much time in the past fighting with potential allies instead of looking for common ground, and agreeing to disagree. To drive housing policy locally, and in Oregon, we have to build a bigger tent.

I.B.: *What are we getting right on the housing front?*

N.F.: We have identified long-term cost effective strategies to end people's homelessness. That means not going after quick fixes and expanding our shelter capacity. Politically, that was a difficult fight at one-time, but it is the right approach. Half way into our 10-year plan — we know we have a model that works.

We have strong political support for our work. We are a collaborative community working with foundations, non-profits, the private sector and government. We can always do it better though.

The challenges are that we need to be more organized, and we need develop more resources. We have to guard against complacency and frankly, we have to hit the refresh button and question assumptions. We always have to be asking how we can do it better. The economy has thrown us for a loop, and there's no question that some of our non-profit community partners are fragile, and it's been brutal on some of our best providers.

What's been humbling for me is that you can't take for granted that we've made our case around homelessness and housing with the public, and that the public is always going to be with you.

We're halfway through a 10-year plan to end homelessness, and the 30 percent set aside for Urban Renewal dollars is up for reconsideration. Like I said before, we have to be on high alert, active and able to state our case. We know we're all collectively doing good work. We just have to continue to build that big tent and move forward.