

In this economic crisis, County must make wise investments



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BY DEBORAH KAFOURY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

On a cold night last winter, I took my 10-year-old son with me to serve dinner at the Winter Warming Shelter. By the time we arrived, families were already lined up outside.

The evening flew by. While I helped dish out servings of lasagna, salad and roasted vegetables, my son played with the children who were staying at the shelter.

As we were driving home, I thanked my son for coming with me and asked him what he thought about the evening. He was silent for a minute and then, remembering the families waiting by the door, said "it was really cold out tonight."

My children are used to dinner time conversation about those in need. We talk about poverty, homelessness and helping others. But all the words in the world cannot replace an evening's experience.

We all know times are tough. Sometimes the problems feel so daunting that you don't know where to begin. As your Multnomah County Commissioner, one of the best opportunities I have to make a difference is through the County's Budget.

On May 5, County Chair Jeff Cogen released his proposed budget. My fellow Commissioners and I have just over a month to ask questions, propose changes, and adopt a balanced budget.

Over one third of the County's budget comes from the state and federal governments. We are expecting anywhere from \$17 million to \$60 million of cuts to essential services like mental and physical health care, public safety, and energy assistance.

On the one hand, given the unknown cuts ahead, I feel the need to be conservative with our general fund. If the state cuts programs that people in our community can not live without, we may have to step in.

On the other hand, the hard times are here and I believe we need to invest in people who need help.

My priorities for this year include a few items that I know will make a difference in people's lives immediately. Some of these items I've highlighted below were in the Chair's proposed budget and some I will propose as amendments to the budget.

■ **Short Term Rent Assistance.** It works. With small amounts of money we can prevent and end homelessness. This year, the County devoted a little more than \$354,000 to short-term rent assistance. In this budget, Chair Cogen added an additional \$500,000, which is tremendous. But with stimulus funds going away, this increased investment will only maintain the current level of rent assistance. Already, agencies that distribute rent assistance run out by the 5th of every month. For that reason, I'm going to ask the Board to double the proposed addition to \$1 million. (If you need rent assistance, please call 211).

■ **Bridges to Housing** provides 139 previously homeless families with housing and intensive case management. The private grant funding that built this program is now finished. It is critical housing for families that we've built over the last five years and we can't afford to let it go away. Thank you to the Chair for including an additional \$480,000 to fully fund Bridges to Housing.

■ **East County Outreach.** People are sleeping outside from Forest Park to Thousand Acres outside of Troutdale. Last year, the County partnered with JOIN on a pilot program to reach out to people camping in East County. Our small investment of \$75,000 was much more effective at ending homelessness than continued sweeps by the Sheriff's office. I will propose that the County continue to fund this effort.

■ **Rapid Re-Housing.** For the last two years, I've requested emergency funding to house families in our winter warming shelter. The first year, we housed 32 families in 30 days. Last year, we housed over 65 families. At my request, Chair

Cogen added \$325,000 to the budget again this year, so we don't have to wait for an emergency. This strategy works to get families quickly out of shelter and into stable housing.

■ **Action for Prosperity.** The County's dedicated anti-poverty providers are trying new ways to address homelessness. The newest approach pairs rent assistance, case management, and job training together for families in crisis.

Stimulus dollars initially funded this program, named Action for Prosperity. I will be advocating adding \$195,000 for another phase of this initiative, leveraging investments from the Housing Authority of Portland and Worksystems Inc, our partners in this effort.

■ **Street Roots'**

Rose City Resource.

County staff and those

we contract with use this guide on a daily basis. It's time we started paying our fair share of the cost to produce and distribute it. The Chair included \$20,000 in the proposed budget to make sure the Street Roots' Rose City Resource continues to exist.

Together, these items total just over \$2.1 million. In light of the economic crisis we find ourselves in, these are wise investments that will help people immediately. I would appreciate any feedback you have on these proposals and on the budget in general. Email me at district1@multco.us or come to a budget hearing and share your opinion. The full schedule and link to the proposed budget is available at <http://web.multco.us/board/budget-hearings..>

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Cost of renting continues to creep out of reach

ALISON MCINTOSH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Rents rise despite high unemployment, foreclosures and downed economy

Higher prices in the rental market continue to force Oregon families to choose between paying rent, putting food on the table, and paying utility bills. A national study reports that the cost of renting an apartment in Oregon has increased again, an alarming trend for a state with unemployment at 10 percent.

"The on-going recession, high unemployment and continued wave of foreclosures in Oregon continues to make it more difficult for hard working Oregonians to find a safe, decent and affordable place to call home," said Janet Byrd, Chair of the Housing Alliance, "In Oregon, we believe everyone needs a place to call home. As we work together to solve the current budget crisis, the Legislature needs to prioritize providing basic needs to those most impacted by the ongoing recession."

According to the report released today by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), the average rent and the income required to afford those rents continue to rise despite high unemployment and foreclosures. As rents continue to increase,

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more and more Oregon families find themselves homeless for the first time.

"Every year it is becoming more difficult for hard working Oregonians to find decent homes they can afford," said Suzanne Washington, Deputy Director of Impact Northwest. "This year, someone making minimum wage in the Portland metro would have to work nearly twelve hours a day, seven days a week just to be able to afford a place to call home."

"Hardworking people should be able to afford housing and still have enough money for groceries and other basic necessities," said Janet Byrd. "Too many families in the Portland metro area can't afford a safe, stable place to call home. We're calling on the State Legislature to provide support for affordable housing and emergency rent assistance to help protect families and children affected by the recession."

The report, Out of Reach 2010, was jointly released by the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), a Washington, DC-based housing advocacy group, and

Oregon's Housing Alliance. The report provides data for every state, metropolitan area and county in the country. The report also defines a housing wage, which for Oregon is \$15.81, nearly double Oregon's minimum wage. The Housing Wage is the hourly wage a family must earn — working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year — to be able to afford rent and utilities in the private housing market. The average fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Oregon is \$822 — a number that has increased 35 percent since 2000.

This year, Oregon is the 29th most expensive state in the nation for renters. The National Housing Wage is \$18.46 in 2011.

For additional information, visit www.nlihc.org/oor/oor2011/.

The Housing Alliance brings together advocates, local governments, housing authorities, community development corporations, environmentalists, service providers, business interests and all others dedicated to increasing the resources available to meet our housing needs to support a common statewide legislative and policy agenda.

Love America

by Sam Al-Jondi

America is you and me
Always and forever more to be.
Work of the divine is in thee.
For all to wonder and see
From sea to shining sea.

Red White and Blue!
For that who knows and that
Who has no clue.
Yes we can, yes we can do.

The people with the plan
Where the Noble blood ran
Yes we can, yes we can.
Do you understand Mr. Stan?

Lead humanity, not into temptation
But to the Land of Salvation
True Guardians of Civilization
That is our destination.

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