

John Miller

Oregon Opportunity Network's new executive director talks about the triumphs and challenges to making housing affordable to all

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Oregon's network of community development organizations — those developers, nonprofits and agencies that have been the backbone of affordable housing and economic development for low-income, elderly and disabled Oregonians — has taken a thrashing in the past few years.

The recession hit community development corporations, or CDCs, front and back, cutting resources while increasing demand. Despite progress in preserving and creating apartments and homes affordable to people in poverty, they haven't kept pace with the growing ranks of their clientele.

The Oregon Opportunity Network, or Oregon ON, represents those developers, housing authorities, investors, service providers and community leaders that make affordable housing happen in Oregon. Combined, they have developed more than 16,000 units of housing, including single-family homes, and helped counsel and support more than 10,000 new homebuyers annually, according to Oregon ON.

In May, John Miller took the helm of Oregon ON as its new executive director, having served for nine years as the executive director of HOST Development, a nonprofit community development organization that built homes for low- and moderate-income buyers in Portland.

Although the recession is "technically" over, the wake of the housing collapse and economic uncertainty continues to roil the marketplace and political halls. Street Roots talked with Miller about the state of affordable housing, the message from member developers, and the challenges ahead.

Joanne Zuhl: *The big question: What is the pulse of affordable housing in Portland?*

John Miller: I think that we have a really strong set of folks who are doing their best to deliver affordable housing with the resources that they have. And that we also have a city that is committed to delivering a reliable supply of affordable housing. But I think that, as always, and this has been the same, recession or no, that there are not enough resources to meet the needs. I started in the affordable-housing industry in 2002, and at that time real estate was going up, and there were still really not enough affordable shelter

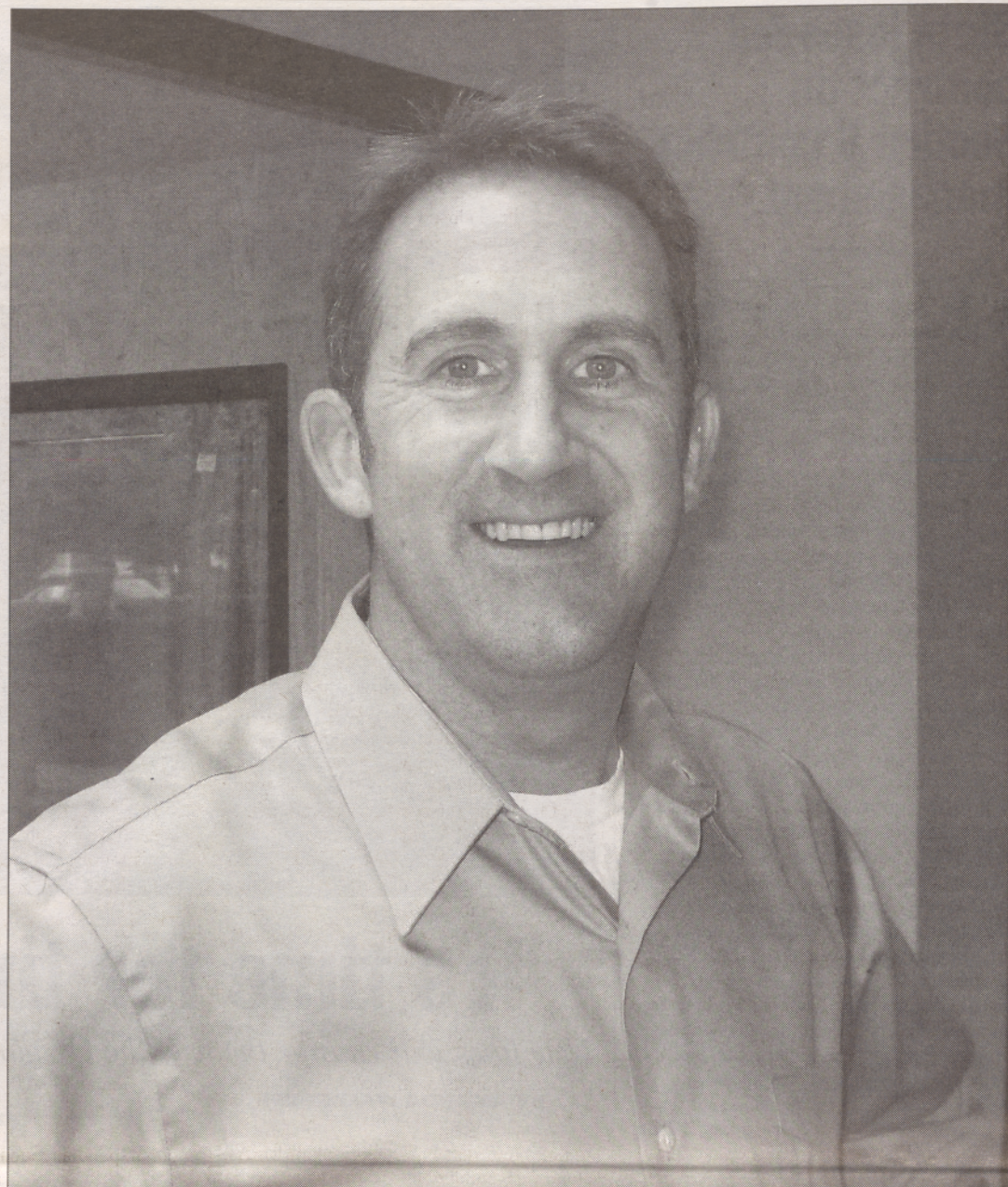


PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON ON

at all at that point. And I think we're worse now because the recession has created a huge demand.

And the big issue often is we supply housing but we don't supply all the services that go along with the housing, and those service dollars are still missing. And just like eight years ago, they're still not here. Overall, we have more units, which is great, but we also have a much higher demand.

J.Z.: *You mention the service components — do we lose a bang for our buck when we don't have those wraparound services there?*

J.M.: Certainly. I think when you look at the cost to build a new unit, compared to the cost of bringing someone in, giving them some extra services, helping them to where they become self-sufficient and they can move out. You retain the unit, but you now use it for two people. Without those services, they could have been stuck there and you only have one turn out of a unit. The only way to fix that is

to build more units. But I think in the long term, the key is helping people become self-sufficient, and not needing the subsidized unit over and over again. So you get a big bang for your buck if you provide services. The services, economically, might be a fraction of the cost compared to what it would take to build a new unit for every single person who has needs. You definitely lose when you don't provide services.

J.Z.: *Speaking about the new demand, and the recession, does that change Oregon ON's message in 2011 and what you're calling for to get back ahead of the game?*

J.M.: I'm not sure the message is necessarily altered, but I think it needs to be louder. There are a few things that we have seen differently. One is that a lot of the folks that our members are serving are the folks who were employed six months before, or a

See MILLER, page 5

You say you want a
REVOLUTION?

We're
Re-creating
Revolutionary
Communities

Peace
Of
The
Action
.net

people's
FOOD CO-OP

good food. free classes.
real community.

3029 SE 21st Ave
open 8a-10p daily
EBT accepted
(503) ORGANIC
www.peoples.coop