

'Never say never'

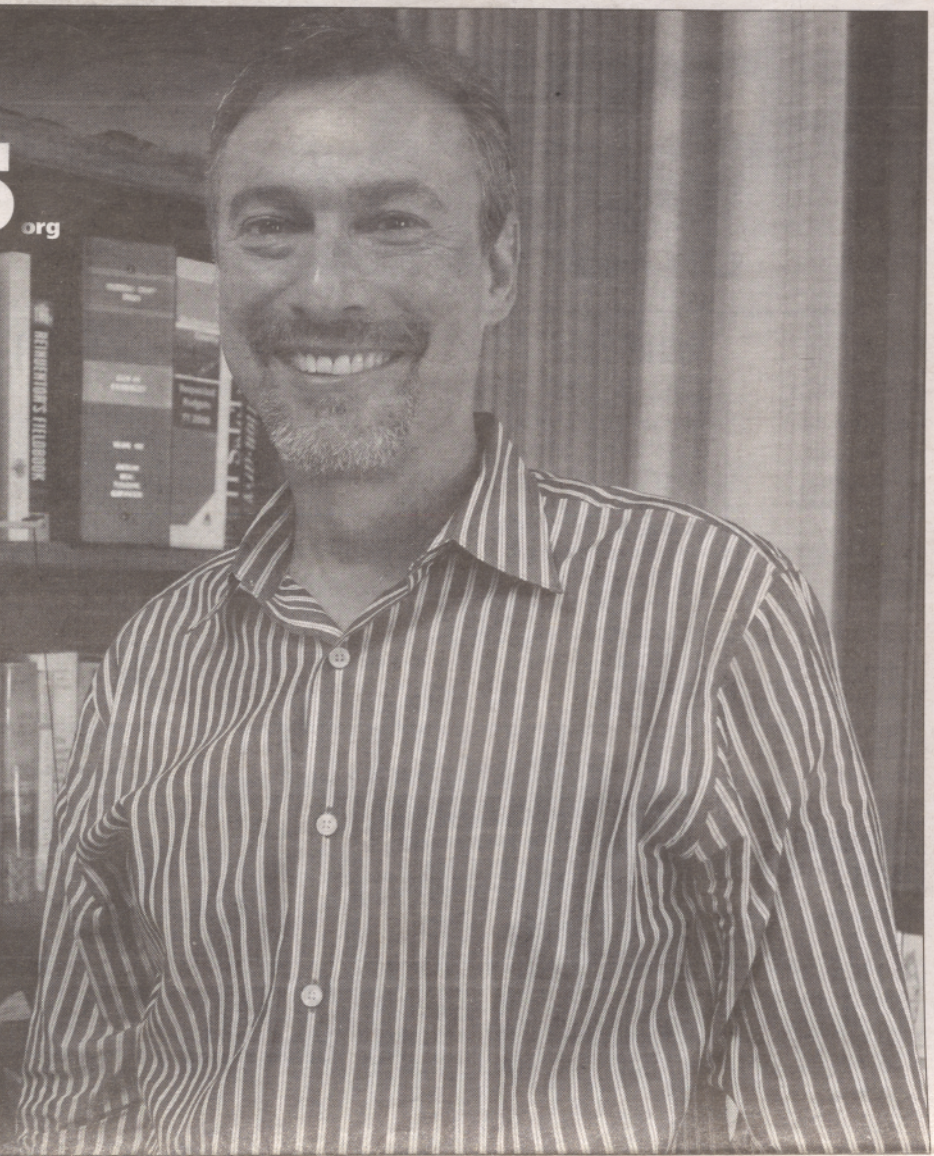


PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

A talk with Multnomah County Chairman Jeff Cogen on what's wrong, what's right, and what could be

BY ISRAEL BAYER
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From "Shakedown Street" at Grateful Dead shows to creating the first certified organic bakery in Portland with the Portland Pretzel Company, Jeff Cogen approaches life with a different perspective, and that includes his leadership of the most dynamic county in Oregon.

Today, Cogen is leading by example and has taken on progressive projects at the county including food production, fighting for people experiencing homelessness and poverty, and even talking on the chemical industry.

Street Roots recently sat down with Cogen to talk about politics, his ambitions and issues facing the people of Multnomah County.

Israel Bayer: We hear so much about the dysfunction of government and wasteful spending. Can you talk a little bit about how the county has to overcome this kind of thinking and give some examples of how local governments are working together to improve the region's quality of life?

Jeff Cogen: The leadership of Multnomah County works really well together right now. Our challenge is letting people know we are working for them, and trying to behave in a way that people can see we are taking actions in a way that builds people's confidence — especially in this country where we have to rebuild peoples faith in government — because there has frankly been a very organized right-wing campaign to make

government the enemy.

Really what government is, is people coming together to take care of their collective needs. I think it's so important that we get people buying into and understanding that we have it in our capacity, in our own community and as a country, to solve our problems.

I.B.: A lot of average people, the same people on the Barack Obama train three, four years ago, are starting to fall like flies and become disillusioned. How does the average Portlander play a role in moving a conversation forward that government is not bad?

J.C.: That's a great question, and I don't have magic answers for this. For me personally, I try to focus on what we are doing locally. I have been really saddened that President Obama's heartfelt integrity to work with people has been met with very effective cynical attacks.

Regardless of how the president has responded to these negative attacks, I feel like what we have going on in Portland and Multnomah County is reason to believe that, "Yes, we can." It's more tangible. And for me I can wrap my hands and head around what's happening locally, and believe that the decisions we make mean that local government matters. In some ways the most powerful thing we can do is to show the nation a model of government making a difference, government doing positive things, government helping solve our problems. And that's why I get really fired up

to do the work locally.

I.B.: On one hand, the urban core in Portland is celebrated nationally, even globally, for its livable and lively neighborhoods. On the other, we see a massive migration of people of color and low-income people being pushed out of these neighborhoods for the past two decades. What's the answer?

"We have been very successful in revitalizing neighborhoods in the urban core and making them friendly and livable. What we haven't done is address the underlying problems that were there in the first place. I'm talking about poverty, homelessness, drug addictions, mental illness and racial inequality. We haven't addressed these issues. We've pushed them aside, or out of the urban core."

J.C.: That's a great observation. Both of those statements are true. Our urban core is cool. It's a nice place for most people — not everyone, obviously — but we have been very successful in revitalizing neighborhoods in the urban core and making them friendly and livable. What we haven't

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