

Charlie Hales

The former city commissioner hopes his experience and 'smarter solutions' will win over voters next spring

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

More than 30 years ago, Charlie Hales, a newly minted graduate of the University of Virginia, packed up his car and left for a city he had heard great things about: Portland. After falling in love with the city, he launched a career and got involved in Portland's civic life, serving on the Hayhurst Neighborhood Association board and getting elected to City Council in 1993.

While on City Council, Hales became heavily involved with rail transit projects, particularly the streetcar line that runs through downtown and Northwest Portland and has drawn national attention for helping transform an old rail yard into a vibrant

Street Roots is conducting a series of interviews with the candidates for mayor and City Council. If you missed an edition, you can catch up at www.streetroots.wordpress.com

neighborhood. In 2002, Hales left City Council to take a position with HDR Engineering, where he worked on other rail projects in different parts of the country.

Hales is hoping to return to City Hall, this time as mayor, to address community policing, water and sewage rates, improving East

Portland and other issues.

He talked with Street Roots after spending a morning volunteering with Friends of Trees, a nonprofit that seeks to expand Portland's tree canopy.

"I've been at it for years. It's really fun," says Hales of working with the organization, where he has volunteered for 20 years and currently serves on its board.

J.T.: *Some of these streetcar and other rail project that you've been associated with have significantly raised property values in nearby neighborhoods. The Interstate Corridor Urban Renewal Area was created, in part, for the MAX Yellow Line. There have been reports that a lot of people have had to leave Northeast because it's too expensive. How do you make sure urban renewal works for everybody?*

C.H.: Urban renewal is a tool. How you use that tool matters. I think now we're going to try and make sure that our urban renewal strategy is about small-scale neighborhood redevelopment, not grand-scale downtown redevelopment. We've done some grand-scale downtown redevelopment really well. I'm really proud of what we've done with the Pearl District and the whole west end of downtown that has been renovated. There's a lot more affordable housing than there was before in downtown, there's a lot more market-rate housing in

downtown than there was before, and there are 12,000 people a day riding the streetcar.

So we've done a great job with that tool downtown, but now we have to look at the rest of the city and say, how do we help those neighborhoods achieve their goals on a more modest scale? What people want to do on Sandy Boulevard or Foster Road are on a different scale than what we accomplished downtown, and it ought to be more about helping the existing businesses grow and improve their buildings and improve the number of employees they have rather than replacing them with something else. I've always been a big believer in basing the city's work on what the neighborhoods come up with for their own plans.

A good example is we're finally building the Sellwood Bridge. Ten years after starting to talk about it, we're finally building one. When I was in charge of the transportation bureau, the neighborhoods along Tacoma Street and the Sellwood Moreland Improvement League came to me and said, we're worried that this is going to become a freeway through our neighborhood for Clackamas County commuters. So I held the line against the Oregon Department of Transportation and Clackamas County and insisted that the bridge be designed to be a two-lane bridge with better bike lanes and wider sidewalks. The neighborhood's livability trumped regional auto convenience, and that's the principle that's actually held, and the new bridge is finally being built to that standard. That's the right way to do it. Neighborhood livability first, engineering considerations second.

J.T.: *Every year public transportation gets more expensive. Riders of the free zone downtown are seeing it steadily chipped away. TriMet is beyond the purview of City Council, but I was wondering if you had any ideas on how to preserve the free rail zone?*

C.H.: This is one of those issues that illustrates my strength as a candidate. The big difference between my opponents and me is that I've had 10 years of experience working in city government, and I have a collaborative style of leadership in city government, which is how you get things done. Candidates talk about, 'I will do this. I will do that.' That's actually nonsense. No one does much in City Hall by themselves. You do things by walking down the hall and building a coalition with other members of the City Council because they have the same vote that you have. You've got to have partners at TriMet and Metro and ODOT and Multnomah County and Washington County and the private sector and the nonprofit sector.

Friends of Trees — I'm on their board. We

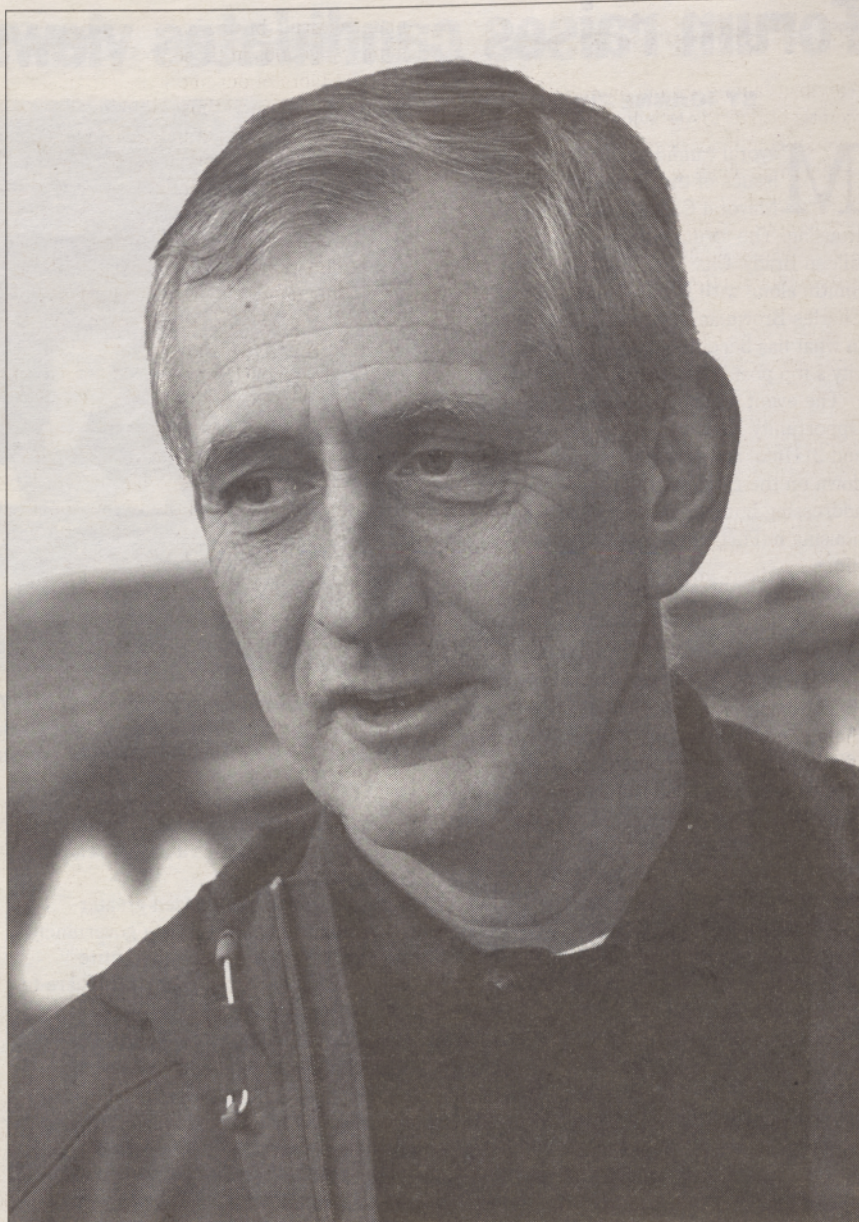


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would have never planted 415,000 trees in Portland if it was a city initiative alone. So the way you get things done in city government is by being a creative, effective and reliable partner with lots of other people. I've been that partner with TriMet, in the past. That's why we have airport light rail. That's why we have interstate light rail because we built that good partnership between the city and TriMet and I was personally involved in making those projects happen. So I'm confident that we can work with TriMet to keep that free rail zone, and if we don't find it we'll find a way for citizens who need transit and don't have the means to pay for it to get around.

One of the most amazing conversations I've ever had about transit was with Susan Emmons, who runs the Northwest Pilot Project, who came up to me in a coffee shop and said, "Hey Charlie, when you were a city commissioner and were making the streetcar project happen, I really didn't like it. I thought it was a toy for yuppies. But now, our clients, these formerly homeless people who are making their way back into the economy, getting housing or job training to enter the workforce, the last thing they can afford is a car, and they are riding that streetcar. I was wrong about it being a tool for yuppies. It's a service for everyone."

Transit should do that. Transit should not just make Portland a model city, it should allow people across the economic spectrum to live good lives.

So the fare-free zone has been a way to do that. But there are other ways. Another strategy at risk is the student pass program, where every student gets to go to school on transit. It would be crazy to lose that and make parents drive kids or not allow kids to go to school reliably. Those strategies that allow everyone to get on the bus or the streetcar or the light rail are really important. The fare free zone was one of those tools, but not the only way to get to that same result.

J.T.: *Speaking of collaboration, how will you work with county and state officials to develop better strategies to meet the needs of people living in poverty?*

C.H.: That's really a high priority for me. One of the things I'm excited about is the opportunity to work with Multnomah County Chair Jeff Cogen. I think he's a great partner. Multnomah County's budget is in tough shape right now, but they're good partners and willing to work on innovative ideas. So I think it's time to reconsider what the city does, what the county does.

There's a lot of overlap and patchwork in that relationship, so I think we take that goodwill we have, and look at that crazy patchwork, and say can't we do better than this? Can't we do better than this patchwork of the city paying for part of mental health services, and the county the other? Or the

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