

Jefferson Smith

Eastside's legislator hits the citywide circuit with his own style of grassroots campaigning

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Jefferson Smith hopes to make history next year by becoming the first mayor to come from east of 82nd Avenue.

Since 2008, Smith has represented part of East Portland in the Oregon House of Representatives and has been a champion for a part of town that has often been overlooked by City Hall and faces challenges in education, transportation and poverty. Smith grew up in Portland where he attended Grant High School. He went on to graduate from Harvard Law School. After taking a high-paying job at a law firm, he left to start the Oregon Bus Project, a nonprofit venture that seeks to increase civic participation through get-out-the-vote and voter-registration initiatives.

While serving in the House, Smith, 38, has worked on how the state manages water, helped upgrade schools, made

budgets more transparent, made it easier to register to vote and even made national headlines by rickrolling the Legislature to the tune of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give you Up."

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

Jake Thomas:
You've long campaigned for greater reinvestment in East Portland, home to a large population of immigrants, families in poverty and working-class communities. What are some concrete things you are going to do for this part of town as mayor?

Jefferson Smith: [Scribbles down points on a legal pad.] Six things. One: Using economic diversity as a lens through which we make planning decisions. When we have built developments in inner Portland we have often not done enough to avoid displacing housing that's displaced by that development elsewhere, including largely in East Portland.

Two: As we make affordable housing investments, making sure that our design review process, while not making it more cumbersome, makes sure to improve the flavor of the neighborhoods.

Third: Looking for some centers of excellence in the area, including the plan for the Gateway Education Center.

Fourth: The safety on the MAX line is something I've been working on for the past year and a half with a bunch of people to try and find low-cost alternatives to improve safety on the MAX line. Crime on TriMet is down everywhere in the city except for east of 82nd Avenue.

One thing we can do is link to my fifth point, which is community policing with a strategy. The plan we're working towards is an "adopt a station" plan. The easiest way to think about it is combining neighborhood watch with Adopt A Highway and doing it around MAX platforms.

Sixth: Do what we can around foreclosures. That part of town is hit harder with more foreclosures than other parts of town. If we can make sure we don't lose the settlement money from the attorney general's lawsuit against the big banks, we can dedicate that toward foreclosure

avoidance.

And the last one I want to say is schools. Schools are not directly within the ambit of the mayor, but nor do I think a mayor or a city can abdicate its responsibility. We have to be looking at routes to increase school capacity. When I was at Grant High School, it was about 1,600 students. David Douglas is about the same size. Grant is still about that size. David Douglas is now about 3,200 students. Eighty percent of those students are on free or reduced-price lunch, and 73 languages are spoken in the school district. We haven't kept up with school capacity in some of our poorest schools as population has increased.

In addition, another thing we can do with schools is set an objective to have the most robust set of summer programs of any city in the nation. We can do that without spending too much because we can stitch together existing nonprofits as well as SUN schools and the parks department and see where the gaps are and help address what we're learning to be one of biggest drivers in the achievement gap between upper-income and lower-income students: the summer gap. This is particularly important for kids who are making critical choices on whether they're going to end up like someone who puts a microphone in my face or like the 13-year-old kid who was beaten and shot to death 10 blocks from my house.

I skipped parks and sidewalks and streets. I applaud Commissioner Fish's efforts at the E205 initiative to get more parks in the area. We have an objective in the city for everyone to be within a 20-minute walk of a park. There are various parts of the city that aren't. One of the biggest swaths of those areas is in East Portland.

We have 59 miles of unpaved road not just in East Portland, but in Southwest. We're not going to pave all of them, but we should pave some of them. We should see if we can't find other funding options to add some more sidewalks to areas that could use them.

J.T.: *You've talked about the need to address the foreclosure crisis on the local level. I was hoping you could talk more about that and how this would work.*

J.S.: According to a joint congressional committee, the economic cost of a foreclosure is about \$77,000. The estimated cost of avoiding a foreclosure is about \$3,000. One thing the city can do to help families facing foreclosure is actually buying their house and working out a deal so that they can stay in it. Banks are not moving money aggressively and aren't terrifically motivated to help with some of those purchases.

The key question is, will the economics work? You can buy the properties for 50 percent to 80 percent market value and get sufficient leverage to do that. So even without that many millions of dollars you can get a lot of properties. If you do it at 50 percent, the risk per unit is higher; if you do it at 80 percent, the risk is lower. We can use some of our leverage with local banking institutions to also get in the mix. The question remains, how should the public-private partnerships be set up? What pots of money are we talking about? The one that seems most obvious is the trying to dedicate a meaningful portion of the bank settlement money should it come so it can kickstart this.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFFERSON SMITH FOR MAYOR

J.T.: *What if the bank settlement money doesn't come?*

J.S.: Yeah. Then I don't think we can set aside the priority merely because of that, but I can't promise to defund current city obligations in order to do it. So we're looking for other pots. So it could be displacement mitigation funds out of urban renewal zones or certain city deposits that we have. We need to prove this up as a meaningful investment so it's fiscally responsible, but doesn't take money out of the general fund. So there's a couple routes we're looking at. We're also looking at what remains from potentially other federal monies.

J.T.: *When previously neglected parts of town see a renewal in investment, it often leads to properties rising in value and people being displaced. Do you worry that if we get all this renewed investment in East Portland, it will just lead to gentrification?*

J.S.: Yes. We're trying to make a hallmark of how we're approaching the race by trying to get to the hard part of questions facing the city. First of all, it's not a bad thing to invest in neighborhoods to make them safer and better. That's a necessary and good thing. It is a bad thing not to do more to avoid undue displacement. So what are some answers?

One, looking at the kind of development that we do so it's culturally relevant so we don't turn it into Bridgeport Village, but we look to support things like Lily Market,

which is a really great Asian food market near my house.

Two, look at aggressive minority-women-emerging-small-business contracting and local-source contracting arrangements so that it's more likely to help with jobs. Because both homeowners and renters need jobs.

Third, if, for instance, we enter into a no-net loss-housing, working hard so that housing is nearby.

Fourth, looking holistically at how we do our city investments. It wasn't merely the investment and no net-loss of housing arrangements in inner Northeast Portland along Interstate that led to displacement, it was also simultaneous under-investment in East Portland. It wasn't just that housing prices in one part of Portland were going up, it was that they were going up disproportionately to other places.

Another is to look at a displacement mitigation fund. When we make urban renewal investments, we need to look for how to make sure that if we break it we buy it.

J.T.: *You've called the requirement that 30-percent of urban renewal funds go toward affordable housing an imperfect tool. I was hoping you could talk more about that.*

J.S.: We have too few funding streams for affordable and public housing. The 30-percent set-aside ought to be a floor not a ceiling. But, for instance, with the significant reduction in national or federal