

WHITE, from page 3

M.W.: Well, one of the things we need to do is look at the different programs that are out there. For instance there is the home ownership opportunity area. And a lot of it includes the David Douglas School District. Part of the problem with that is twofold: It gives incentives for people to buy new homes, so it encompasses an area that's divided by 122nd Avenue, and both sides of 122nd are zip codes that are the first and second with the highest number of foreclosures in the area. So if folks are trying to sell their homes and buyers are getting incentives to buy new homes, then there's tons of foreclosures. The ability for them to sell their homes is almost non-existent. I know a couple of people who lost their homes and moved into foreclosure because of that. So we need to make sure that there's not unintended consequences of our programs.

The other incentives that the city has used in the past that I'm pretty sure of is to build three-, four- and five-bedroom units, and that is one of the reasons why the complex I mentioned has so many children, because there's lots of really big units with three to five bedrooms. And every single school within the David Douglas School District is either at, or over capacity. I think a large part of that is because of incentive programs done by the city, and I don't think there's any discussion about changing those. It's really seriously damaging the David Douglas School District's ability to do its job well. I have to say I've been to a number of school board meetings and these are incredibly passionate people who embrace the diversity that exists in the community and are doing a tremendous job doing the best they can with what's there, but I think it would be better if the economic situation was a little bit more blended, and it wasn't just so many folks who were on free or reduced-price lunch. For example, in David Douglas High School there's over 2,250 kids on free or reduced lunch.

If we can't do things to help rectify those challenges, it doesn't help anyone in the city, because eventually, what's going to happen is, areas like this that become so incredibly blighted and overwhelmed, it's going to start sucking resources from the rest of the city. It's really important for us to have blended and balanced communities, and if we can't achieve that, we need to reevaluate who we are.

J.T.: What do you think the city's doing right or wrong with urban renewal?

M.W.: I have to really think about what's being done right. Obviously what's happened in the Pearl District, some would say has been a good thing; it's changed that area quite a bit. It creates tons of tax revenue, which unfortunately stays in the urban renewal area.

I think others would say that there are a lot of folks who live there who were pushed out, and I think that's the case in North and Northeast Portland, obviously. I think if things don't change with the strategy, if there is one, on the east side of the river with urban renewal, we're going to see the same kinds of things.

Part of the problem is that Portland has a tendency, I think, to apply inner Portland codes and zoning to East Portland, and it doesn't work. The same thing with urban renewal. What worked in downtown just doesn't work outside of downtown. For example, in downtown there are lots of

buildings and activity. You can buy a building, and someone in a short period of time is going to want to develop it. In the Lents Town Center Urban Area there are properties; some have been owned for a decade or more, and nothing has happened with them. We also need to focus on employment and infrastructure, particularly transportation infrastructure.

J.T.: You've been outspoken on the lack of transit in East Portland. In the past you've said that the way the city has invested in the street car has created "two Portlands" What would you do to make transit more equitable in East Portland?

M.W.: Well, I think if you were to look at a map of transit activities and investment within the city of Portland — I'm pretty sure I've seen this map — it would show that the vast majority of this activity is in and around downtown. And while I think that's a good thing — downtown is beautiful, it's very important to the city as a whole — it doesn't really help other parts of the city.

My neighborhood, I think, is a really good example. In 10 to 15 years it's the most populated neighborhood in the city, and it doesn't have a single major street with contiguous sidewalks.

It has more unpaved roadways than any other neighborhood in the city, and it has six of the 15 most dangerous intersections in the city. So those are three transportation related things that clearly show that other parts of the city aren't benefiting from the investment we're making.

The city leadership has a tendency to do what's easiest instead of what's right or best. It's not easy to try and fix the transportation issues that exist in East Portland and other parts of the city, but I think it's incumbent on us morally to at least try. One of the biggest issues that I have is that there are always discussions about doing low-hanging fruit. And often what happens is that the city does the low-hanging fruit and then they kind of walk away and say, we've done some stuff so we're going to go do some other stuff. A lot of times, they don't come back. The problem with that is, if you look at a fruit tree, the vast majority of the fruit is not low-hanging. It's up at the top, and you don't pick it, it falls and rots and creates a big mess, and I think that's kind of what's happening. You try and do the easy stuff, and we kind of just look the other way when it comes to the hard stuff. If you want to look at the hard stuff, drive down Powell Boulevard. I think it's the single biggest embarrassment to the city, and no one has really done anything about it, until the last year or so, and now things are such that the money's not really going to be there to do the things that are necessary.

One of the ideas I had was to try and use the system and development charges for transportation to pay for the salaries of civil engineers who would do nothing but help residents work on putting sidewalks in front

of their homes if they wanted to do that. It becomes really important for there to be this beginning of a renaissance of communities out here, because before, when there wasn't a lot of folks out here, it didn't matter as much, but now we just have so many children it's mind boggling.

Coming up with the money to do it is hard, but coming up with civil engineers to do it is one of the most expensive parts of putting in sidewalks. So if that part of the component is already done for residents, then they might be able to band together and come up with a way to pay for the concrete and the other stuff on their own and reduce the amount of cost to them personally and make it happen a lot more quickly than the city would be able to.

J.T.: On your website, you write about a plan to champion a nonprofit food-processing facility that would employ marginalized communities. I'd like to hear more about that and how it would work.

M.W.: My dream would be that folks would have the ability to work within the facility at whatever capacity, but all the profits would go towards folks to establish themselves within the social service network so they can connect to different services like employment and health care. I think it's a way to build an economic base for the entire city.

For example, in East Portland in particular, there are huge, huge amounts of cultural newcomers. They have seven to eight months to learn a new language, learn a new culture, find a place to live, get their kids in school, get a job and all that stuff before their government subsidies are cut. It's really, really hard to do that. So one of the things that would help is to use culturally inspired foods, that they bring from their country of origin, in community kitchens that are spread throughout the city that allow them to produce products that they can bring to a farmers' market. Eventually, if their product becomes recognized and popular, this facility could take it on and produce it and distribute it. I'd also like to see a hybrid of the food cart scene and Saturday Market, which is to kind of retool the mall concept and shrink it down so people can start small and move up. Or it can be someone who just wants to supplement their income, or it can be a haircutter or tattoo artist. Ultimately, I'd like to see this facility as an incubator for products once they reach a certain level.

J.T.: I'd like to get your thoughts on how to sustain or even increase funding for affordable housing.

M.W.: The housing commission has discussed ways to replicate what's been done in Seattle with the housing levy that's dedicated to affordable housing. It gives you a definitive amount of money for a definitive amount of time, so there's no scrambling to get things done or to know how much you'll have this year or that year. That's the

problem with urban renewal, is that all of a sudden there's almost no urban renewal money. With the housing levy, each year you know how much you're going to have for very targeted projects that give you serious return on investment. What I'd look to do is combine money from the housing levy with money from urban renewal to further supplement it and make sure there's an economic development component as part of it.

J.T.: Do you have ideas on how the city can collaborate with the county to address the needs of its neediest citizens?

M.W.: Off the top of my head, I'd say that we should probably play to our strengths. Portland is really good at capital projects. The county is really good at social services. If we have respect for those things and work toward a common goal, that's our best course of action. As far as specifics, I don't know. I'd have to talk to the county in order to really have some specific answers.

J.T.: I wanted to get your thoughts on the creation of the Office of Equity and Human Rights and if there were any issues you'd like to see it take up.

M.W.: I would say that my only concern about the Office of Equity has been that I don't think that it has the teeth in order to really seriously address the issues that are before us. The institutionalized racism in the city is actually quite profound, and to throw \$1.5 million at it, I don't want to say insulting, but I don't think it addresses the issues.

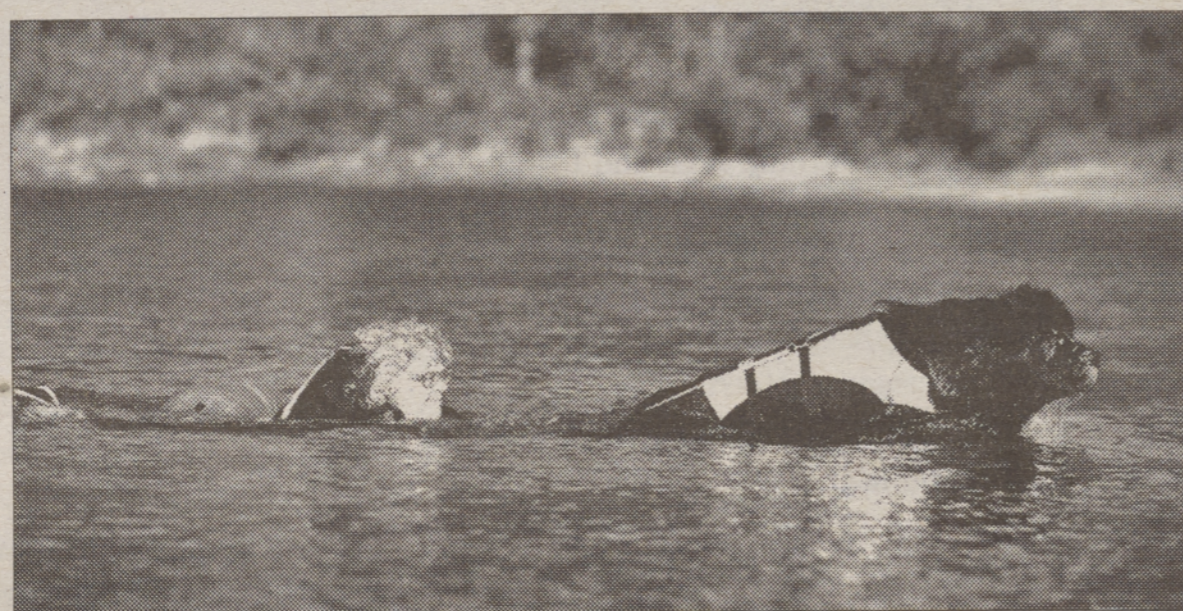
I think it's really going to get down to the public pushing these issues rather than allowing the city to drive them. I think it's important for folks to realize that before the Office of Equity and Human Rights there was the Office of Human Relations, and there was something before that. I've heard that over time these agencies get a little tread and they're retooled. It's probably something that needs to be independent and not dependent on the city to fund it for it to really get going.

But one thing I try to convey to folks, especially with Occupy Portland, is that the ability to make sweeping changes in government already exists, and it's the Charter Commission. The Charter Commission has the ability to do tremendous, tremendous things for our city, and City Hall has intentionally kind of bound our hands. I talked to Occupy Portland organizers there and encouraged them to participate in the process.

There's so many things that we could do, and my hope is that the Occupy Portland folks will use that in a very bottom-up approach and go out into the community and work in places like East Portland and North Portland and Northeast Portland and help people to find their voice and to reclaim the power that they have over government, because you do that, and you start electing people who will effect the change you'd like to see. Not because you're asking them, but because they know that's what needs to be done.

You start in Portland, and you show the rest of the state that this can be done at a local municipality and then spread this throughout the state and the country. I really truly believe that Portland can be a better template for better government, and I'm really disappointed that we haven't really used the Charter Commission to that end.

"There's a lot of folks who live there (the Pearl District) who were pushed out, and I think that's the case in North and Northeast Portland, obviously. I think if things don't change with the strategy, if there is one, on the east side of the river with urban renewal, we're going to see the same kinds of things."



"Asperger's has real blessings. I am not focused on what most people seem to be focused on. I live a very interior life and it's filled with joy. I have insatiable curiosity about things."

— Leska Emerald Adams, shown here with her service dog, Orka.

Leska Emerald Adams' story is part of a series on people living with the controversial diagnosis on Asperger's Syndrome by photojournalist Leah Nash. This remarkable project was sponsored by the Regional Arts and Culture Council and Street Roots. View the entire series can be seen at www.streetroots.wordpress.com.