

Candidates forum brings out the polished and passionate

City Council contenders weigh in on housing, homeless issues

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

New and familiar faces among the candidates for City Council addressed an invested audience on issues of affordable housing and homelessness Jan. 23.

The Candidates' Forum on Housing brought together the leading contenders for the two council seats on the ballot next spring. Commissioner Amanda Fritz, Oregon Rep. Mary Nolan and Teresa Raiford are contending for the Commissioner 1 position, currently held by Fritz. And Jeri Sundvall-Williams and Steve Novick are vying for the Commissioner 4 position, which is being vacated by Randy Leonard.

The panel fielded questions prepared by the event sponsors on issues of gentrification, job creation, funding for affordable housing, civil rights for the poor, and streamlining bureaucracy. Oregon Opportunity Network, JOIN, 211info and Street Roots sponsored the event, which was held at the First Unitarian Church in Downtown Portland.

One underlying theme through several of the queries had to deal with preserving what we have, and finding new resources for what we need.

Novick, like all the candidates, acknowledged the tough times ahead: The city is facing an 8 percent spending reduction in the next budget cycle, federal and state funds are drying up, and the city's housing fund generator, tax increment financing, is facing a major drop in revenue in the coming years.

Novick put forward several options for potential resources, including adopting a local beer and wine tax and a possible prison dividend drawn from the savings of sending fewer people to prison for shorter terms. He also revisited a major theme of his campaign: health care, as a measure of prevention, cost savings and job creation.

"My biggest plank on jobs is making Portland the best city in the world on controlling health care costs," Novick told the audience. "It will make us a magnet for business."

Each candidate drew on his or her



PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Candidates for City Council, left to right, Commissioner Amanda Fritz, Oregon Rep. Mary Nolan, Teresa Raiford, Jeri Sundvall-Williams and Steve Novick at the Candidates' Forum on Housing.

particular set of personal and professional circumstances. Sundvall-Williams referenced her personal struggles with the law, poverty, and the challenges to secure low-income housing and employment. She now works for the city, and spoke pointedly on the laws that penalize people who have no money.

"My greatest frustration with the city is how people like me get treated," Sundvall-Williams said, noting the system of fines and penalties for people who can't afford basic needs such as transportation. "One of my biggest stressors is watching the criminalization of people in poverty."

On gentrification issues, Sundvall-Williams called for better planning for areas targeted for renewal. "We plan where our prosperity is going to be; we don't plan for where our poverty pockets are going to be."

Sundvall-Williams also called for greater investment in prevention programs such as drug and alcohol recovery programs and mental health services, which would be cost effective in preventing incarceration, keeping families together, and encouraging

employment and sustainability.

Raiford delivered a message of inclusion – getting people from all communities in Portland at the table on issues that impact their neighborhoods. The absence of that inclusion has left many in some communities feeling gentrified and disenfranchised from the process.

"If we don't include the whole core of Portland, than we're still losing and missing the point."

Nolan spoke to creating a new culture in the city, one that fosters job creation, streamlines the bureaucracy for development, and changes the behavior and investments that have led to disparities in neighborhoods.

"I think we get our heads out of City Hall and into the neighborhoods," she said when asked about how to correct the negative impacts of gentrification.

Nolan also called for making workforce housing a greater priority.

"We've put a priority on really low-income housing, and I understand the basis behind

that," she said. "But what it has meant is that we have a growing gap in houses for families in the working class. We need to put more energy into solving that problem."

Fritz spoke frankly about her own role on the City Council, particularly as a backer for Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau. She defended her record on the sidewalk management ordinance, limited car camping, and the implementation of the new Office of Equity and Human Rights. She said she would continue to support the 30 percent set aside for affordable housing, incentives to create more low-income units, and efforts to find another sustainable funding source for housing. She also stressed prevention, in mental health care, recovery and employment, to keep people from falling through the cracks.

"We need to be creating jobs within the city to make sure people who have had challenges can overcome them and get good jobs," Fritz said.

'Drug impact zones' 244 people lighter after exclusions

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Six months into operation, the city's drug impact zone program has excluded 244 defendants from the city's downtown and inner eastside neighborhoods – nearly one in four of all arrests for heroin, cocaine and marijuana in the county during that period.

The \$250,000 program, implemented in June, allows the courts to exclude people from three geographical areas for up to two years, based upon their conviction. The three DIAs – assigned for heroin, cocaine and marijuana convictions – largely overlap covering the Downtown, Old Town, and Holladay Park neighborhoods.

The period ended in November, and the city released the report just this month.

"When you look at the amount of crime and the types of crime – it's working," said Billy Prince, DIA prosecutor with the Multnomah County District Attorney's office. Prince spoke to members of the Old Town/Chinatown Livability Committee, which led the cry last year to bring back exclusions to the neighborhood.

Prince was referring specifically to a

sampling of 90 defendants who were arrested in the Downtown and Old Town neighborhoods who had histories of drug dealing and violence.

Altogether, the report references 1,064 arrests involving heroin, cocaine and marijuana throughout the county – 824 of them outside of the three DIAs. Regardless of where the arrest took place, a convicted offender could be excluded from one or all of the three areas downtown.

According to the report, 81 percent of those arrested in the DIAs for dealing resided outside the areas and had come into the areas to sell the drugs. The vast majority, 180, of the 244 exclusions are for possession, with the remaining 60 for dealing.

While most of those arrested in the DIAs were white, 42 percent were people of color. Among those arrested outside of the areas, 65 percent were white and 35 percent were people of color.

The \$250,000 appropriated for the program pays for the DIA prosecutor as well as overtime for a police walking beat in the neighborhoods. The program also changed policy, ramping up the criminality on heroin

and cocaine residue offenses from violations to misdemeanors, making them eligible for exclusion. Since that changed, 164 cases that were formerly eligible for violation treatment were issued as misdemeanors and were eligible for exclusion as a term of probation.

Depending on the case, some people arrested on drug charges qualify for Multnomah County's STOP drug court treatment program. Defendants enrolled in STOP are not issued exclusions as long as they are actively engaged in treatment. If the defendant does not comply with the STOP court terms, they receive a felony conviction and can then be excluded. Exclusions are not issued for people sentenced to prison.

Exclusions may come with a list of exceptions for people who need to be in one of the DIAs either because they live there or need the services in the neighborhood. Nearly half of those issued exclusions qualify for the city's Service Coordination Team program which helps chronic offenders with integrated drug treatment, housing and related services.