

'We'll have to come together and do our best'

*A conversation with
City Commissioner
Dan Saltzman*

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Dan Saltzman is a veteran Portland city commissioner who has been around the block. During his 12-year stint on city council, he has, at various times, taken heat on both sides of the political spectrum for a variety of issues.

People closest to Saltzman say he's a hard-working, detail-oriented individual that isn't afraid to buck the system to create change. During his tenure as city commissioner, he has taken on the fire and police disability retirement system and led a successful and on-going children's levy, to name a few.

Street Roots recently sat down with Saltzman to talk about city politics and the future of Portland.

Israel Bayer: *You have been one of the most quiet, yet productive, commissioners over the past 12 years. What have been some of your most challenging times as a commissioner, and some of your proudest moments?*

Dan Saltzman: I probably would say that this upcoming budget year and soft economy and how that impacts city governance is probably going to be one of the most challenging. The years I have been on the City Council, it's not to say we haven't gone through cuts in the past, but if everything holds up this could be the most dire.

Some of the best times are getting council to support things — working through two efforts to get voters to reform the Charter successively. One was to revamp the fire and police disability and retirement system, which was largely the fox guarding the henhouse, before all the trustees were either fire or police related. Now it's a five-person board with two union representatives and three citizen representatives. I'm also very proud of being able to be a part of the Children's Levy and all that has accomplished.

I.B.: *With such a tough budget cycle coming up, and knowing that a lot of people and interests are going to be hurt. How do you as a commissioner formulate your priorities this year?*

D.S.: It's always a struggle, and it's up to the council to think globally. We have to think beyond just our own bureaus. I think we've done that in the past, but it can still get in the way with a silo mentality. I do think we try as best we can to rise above all of that in the end.

Like I said before, this is going to be a



PHOTO COURTESY OF DAN SALTZMAN

dire budget year. Saying that, I also want to add that every time, as long as I've been in government, going back to my years on the county commission that the forecasts always start off more dire than they actually end up around April or May. Admittedly, we've never been in economic conditions like this

a real issue.

Of course, making sure that we keep jobs in Portland and try to attract more. I think most of the focus is on keeping the businesses we have and nurturing small businesses so that they can achieve their next level of growth in the region. We can't

then, lastly, investing in as many key intervention points in school — things like after-school programs, mentoring programs, housing and foster care programs along with child abuse invention. It's very hard for children to be successful if they are growing up in a house filled with violence. There's a full spectrum of things to do.

I.B.: *How do you feel like we could be more effective on the affordable housing front?*

D.S.: Obviously, we need more affordable housing and more affordable rental stock in our community. I'm very diligent about supporting rental-housing inspections with council's support. It's absolutely ridiculous some of the conditions people are forced to live in.

There's really not an area that doesn't need support, from shelters to transitional housing to specifically targeted needs that are focused on housing specifically for inner-generational needs, seniors and kids coming out of foster care. How is it possible that someone who is 18 years old has the knowledge and resources to survive on their own coming out of the foster care system? Housing is key to a healthy community.

I.B.: *Tell us more about how you're approaching the Right 2 Dream Too situation.*

D.S.: I'm basically approaching it is as the commissioner in charge of the Bureau of Development Services. From what I have heard and seen they are behaving responsibly. I don't have anything against what they are doing, but as commissioner I have a responsibility to enforce building codes, etc. There is a path for the group to be able to obtain legal status, but I won't be waiving fines. It's not about Right 2 Dream Too, it's attached to the property owner who is responsible.

I.B.: *How do we change the way people think about government, moving it from being a negative to being a positive thing in people's lives?*

D.S.: I'm not sure I have an answer for that. (Laugh). It's clear that our federal government is out of touch and we have to work locally to the best we can to get people involved and to do the right things for our community.

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the entire time I've been in government, but we've been in similar ones. We'll have to come together and do our best.

I.B.: *Knowing the city is experiencing economic difficulties — like most urban environments. What do you see as some of the biggest challenges facing the city over the next decade?*

D.S.: In terms of what the City Council will look like next year, it's going to be a whole new game whether it's two or three new electives. So I'm looking forward to getting the ground laid and for a new city council to begin in January 2013.

I think the big issues continue to be affordable housing. We have to work more to make sure our young people are finishing high school. I've been part of the efforts of Children's Levy. It's going to take all of us working together from different groups, including businesses, labor, and elected officials to focus on the issue. If we don't have a local citizenry trained for a worldwide economy, then we're not going to have people being successful and contributing and being a part of government.

Issues around sustainability are very important. We have to make sure our built environment is more in sync with the natural environment. One of the things hanging over our heads is going to be the Superfund clean up and what amount of money the city is on the hook for this. We are a potentially responsible party. By the time the next council convenes, this will be

just be a stepping-off point for software companies that then have to move to Palo Alto, or Seattle to a lesser extent. So we want companies that are going to grow and stay here.

I.B.: *Having been a Multnomah County Commissioner for five years, you know how difficult it is to raise revenue and keep the safety net intact while maintaining day-to-day operations. How do you feel the city and county are working together, and what more can be done to make the region the most efficient it can be?*

D.S.: I always think the relationship could be better. There's always a certain amount of buzz and talking points that we use about working closer with the county. Supposedly, the relationship with the county and the city has never been greater. I don't know if I buy that. I do think we should be doing more talking together and creating joint commissions. There's a lot that can be done.

I.B.: *What can the city and community do to improve the opportunities and the quality of life for kids who are trapped by poverty?*

D.S.: The thesis behind the Children's Levy is to focus on our children and to find a way to support young people experiencing poverty. We have to constantly be looking at best practices and key points that tell us to invest in organizations and institutions that have a track record of success. Second, is to invest in early childhood education. And

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