

Safety net swings in balance of city budget talks

City's housing and homeless services play the competitive waiting game for coveted one-time appropriations

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Looking at the housing and homeless landscape these days, Portland City Commissioner Nick Fish paints a pretty grim picture.

"It's a rising tide of need with declining resources. That's it in a nutshell," says Fish, who oversees the Portland Housing Bureau. "We've got more adults and families facing homelessness, more families being priced out of the housing market. We've got historic vacancy rates. Unemployment is still very high. We're now catching the foreclosure fever. We're still in a deep recession, and we have fewer resources to meet the need. It's a perfect storm."

This from a self-proclaimed glass-half-full kind of guy.

That internal optimism will be needed as the city slogs forward in its 2012-13 budget "cutting" process, with all bureaus asked by Mayor Sam Adams to submit reduction proposals of 4, 6 and 8 percent. In addition to the bureau packages, the mayor has to decide how the shrunken pool of one-time money — funding allocated in each cycle by the mayor — is divided up. Last year, that was a pool of about \$23 million. This year it's projected at about \$11 million.

Of that, Fish's Portland Housing Bureau is asking for nearly \$4.8 million to pay for the city's social safety net: short-term rent assistance, shelter and emergency services, housing access and homeownership programs, and the Bud Clark Commons. It's not new money, but it is subject to the mayor and council's approval, each with their own bureau budgets in play. The police bureau alone is asking for \$5.4 million in one-time funding. The mayor is expected to come out with his budget in early May.

"It's going to be much more competitive," Fish says, "The safety net is competing against fire stations, against the mayor's education agenda, against the Portland Plan. We're going to have to make some tough choices."

The Portland Housing Bureau's \$91 million total budget request is a combination of seven sources, including the city's General Fund. All of those sources are under pressure. The city is losing \$3 million from federal fund sources because of cuts in Washington, D.C. Its revenue from tax increment financing has hit the cliff —

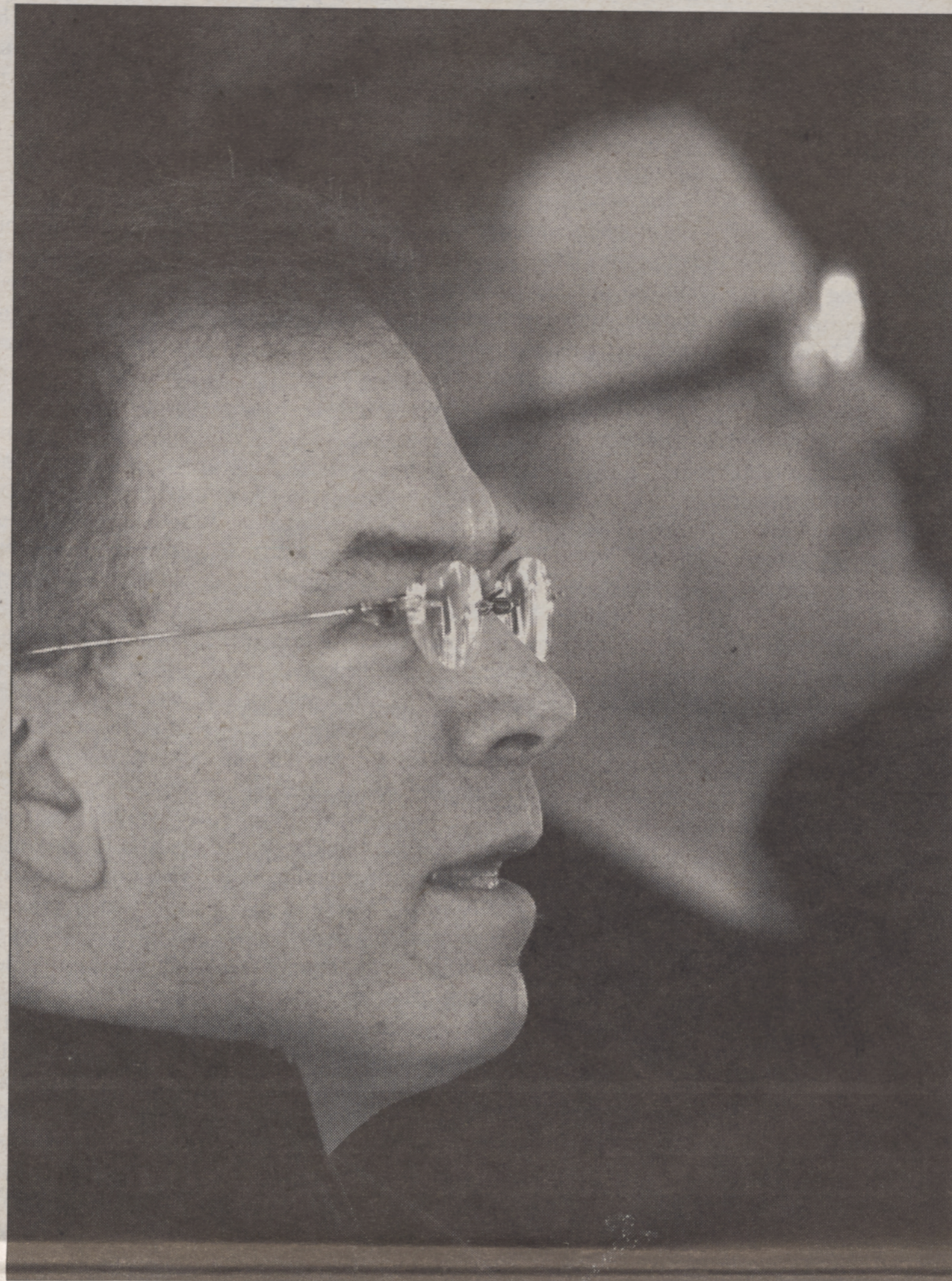


PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

Commissioner Nick Fish (with Mayor Sam Adams in the background) at the groundbreaking for the Bud Clark Commons. The mayor is expected to come out with his proposed budget, with one-time funding allocations, in early May. Under consideration is nearly \$4.8 million for the city's safety net of services that include the Bud Clark Commons shelter and housing programs.

falling from about \$40 million in 2010 to around \$17 million starting next year. An 8 percent reduction would cost another \$500,000.

One of the few constants in the budget has been local funding. The city, under Mayor Adams, has consistently backed the safety net for people engaged in getting off the streets, staying in housing, and securing long-term stable housing.

Adams was unavailable to comment in time for publication, but spokesperson Amy Ruiz said the mayor has long backed these funding streams. "In this especially difficult budget year, he pledges to do his best to continue protecting housing and social services," Ruiz said.

One of the main lines in the safety net is short-term rent assistance, a consolidation of funds leveraged by local money. It is used to pay for a couple of months of rent for qualified families working to stay in housing. JOIN, a nonprofit housing assistance organization, receives about \$100,000 in short-term rent assistance from city coffers. It one of the most significant sources of rent assistance JOIN receives from the General Fund. Unlike other funding sources, this money is flexible enough to fill critical gaps.

"We're very reliant on those funds, especially for some of our highest barrier folks who have the biggest struggles to

The Safety Net

Of its total budget request of \$91,471,065, the Portland Housing Bureau is asking for \$4.8 million in one-time funding, which is at the discretion of the mayor's office. Here's what the net is trying to hold on to:

Homelessness Prevention and Rapid-Rehousing

\$1.9 million

This is for short-term rent assistance to prevent eviction and keep people housed during a difficult transition. Usually a few months of assistance, it money that is flexible and rapidly disbursed to keep people from losing their housing and becoming homeless.

Housing Access Services

\$456,300

This includes programs that provide information and referral, advocacy and case management for low-income renters faced with homelessness, eviction, housing discrimination and unhealthy housing conditions. This often assists hard-to-house individuals, including people with rental screening barriers such as poor credit, evictions and criminal history.

Shelter and emergency services

\$1.734 million

This pays for the three types of shelter services: year-round, winter and severe weather. This money is paired with funding and resources from Multnomah County, Home Forward and other nonprofit partners to provide shelter to hundreds of people on the streets. It also pairs with programs to provide social, health and employment services and help people connect with housing opportunities.

Bud Clark Commons

\$185,000

This is a reduction from last year's budget (down from \$390,000). The building, which houses Transition Projects day and shelter services and Home Forward's housing program, opened this past June as the city's flagship shelter and service facility. In its first six months, the facility reported serving 4,300 people — an average of 600 daily visitors seeking basic needs and services. The city reports that nearly 300 people have found permanent homes through the Day Center since it opened.

Homeownership Programs

\$500,000

This supports homebuyer education, counseling and foreclosure prevention programs. The program is targeted for minority communities as part of the bureau's emphasis on minority homeownership. The funds are leveraged with other sources to provide down payment assistance to qualifying households.

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