

The State of Housing: A Portland Story

BY NICK FISH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

This week I presented my fourth housing budget to the City Council. It is a good time to reflect on the progress we have made together, the challenges we face, and the opportunities that lie ahead.



Nick Fish is the Portland City Commissioner in charge of housing.

Building a New House

I ran for City Council on a platform of changing the way we deliver affordable housing to struggling families, the homeless, and the disabled. I pledged to work with government, nonprofit, business, and faith community partners to build a

new house, not just renovate the old one.

In 2010, Mayor Adams and I delivered on that promise by officially launching a new bureau – the Portland Housing Bureau. We combined all the city's housing programs and funding sources under one roof. Why? Because the old house was divided, and we needed a new, sharper focus on the needs of the growing number of people who cannot afford to live in Portland.

Next, my team and I worked with community partners to develop a Strategic Plan, placing our values of equity and opportunity at the heart of everything we do. The new bureau would focus on three priorities: ending homelessness, preserving and building affordable housing, and closing the minority homeownership gap.

To hold us accountable, we formed a new citizen advisory body, the Portland Housing Advisory Commission, and asked new voices from Portland's communities of color to serve. We also created a new bureau management position charged with measuring our progress.

But we did not build this new house to win a planning award. These deliberate steps will help us better serve struggling families, the homeless and the disabled, and to reduce historic disparities in communities of color.

Our Progress

Two years later, here's what we've accomplished:

Community advocates and I fought to protect local funding for safety net services like short-term rent assistance, which prevents families from falling into homelessness. Council voted to strengthen the city's commitment to using 30 percent of urban renewal dollars to develop affordable homes. The bureau won over \$1 million in new federal money to assist people living with HIV/AIDS.

Our ambitious campaign to preserve and modernize hundreds of apartments occupied by older adults and the disabled protected federal subsidies for over 500 apartments – subsidies worth more than \$50 million over the next 20 years.

Working with partners like Hacienda, PCRI, Human Solutions, and Home Forward, we have invested tens of millions of dollars in quality, affordable homes in neighborhoods throughout the city, from Hillsdale to Cully, Lents to Arbor Lodge.

We opened the doors of the award-winning Bud Clark Commons, a one-stop center combining shelter, affordable apartments, and services to help people get back on their feet. A cornerstone of our city-county 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, it is good news for the 2,700 people who

sleep on our streets or in shelters each night.

We worked with the Veterans Administration and Central City Concern to remove bottlenecks in programs serving our homeless veterans, and broke ground on Gray's Landing, dedicated housing for veterans in South Waterfront.

I brought Portland's first-ever Fair Housing Action Plan to Council, and Multnomah County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury and I co-chaired a Section 8 Task Force to reduce barriers to housing choice throughout our community. Today, voucher holders are more successful in renting apartments, and a citizen committee is working to implement our bold strategy to combat discrimination in rental housing.

Partnering with tenant groups and



landlords, we are improving the quality and safety of rental apartments. Last year, the Council authorized new funding for inspectors to hold landlords accountable.

We are targeting our limited resources to help people keep their homes, and to close the minority homeownership gap. Too many people of color have been victims of discriminatory and predatory lending practices in our community. Working with community-based nonprofits like the African American Alliance for Homeownership, Habitat for Humanity, the Portland Housing Center, NAYA and Proud Ground, we are opening the doors of homeownership to all.

We are developing new approaches to increase contracting opportunities for minority, women-owned, and emerging small businesses. In my own bureaus, I am setting a high bar.

Challenges

Our house is bigger, the foundation is stronger, and the front door is open to more people. But we face new challenges: a rising tide of need, and declining resources to meet the need. Powerful forces, like unemployment and rising rents, contribute to poverty in our community, while our tools are limited and our impact on the overall housing market is relatively small.

More families are losing their homes to foreclosure, more children are going to bed hungry, more veterans are experiencing homelessness, and too many people can't find work.

Portland is at risk of becoming a community of rich and poor, with a strong inner core and poverty moving east. New census data and reports issued by the Coalition for Communities of Color document alarming disparities in education,

health care, housing and employment.

You wouldn't choose to grow less food during a famine. But that's essentially what the federal government is doing this year, drastically reducing Portland's share of federal dollars. A number of Republican candidates for President have even gone so far as to threaten to abolish the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Closer to home, the City of Portland and Multnomah County face significant budget cuts, and the funds generated by urban renewal districts are drying up.

President Abraham Lincoln, during another crisis, challenged the nation to live up to its highest ideals: "We can succeed only by concert. It is not 'Can any of us imagine better?' but, 'Can we all do better?'...The occasion is piled high with

difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew."

There is no doubt that our occasion is piled high with difficulty. The questions are: will we, once again, rise with the occasion? And are we prepared to think and act anew?

The Road Ahead

I am an optimist by nature. But I also know that we cannot succeed without investing in both people and places, strengthening our partnerships, and developing a new approach to fighting poverty and creating opportunity for all. Here are three of my priorities for the next year:

Funding

It's time to demand a renewed national commitment to building strong communities through housing – from ending homelessness, building new homes, and preventing foreclosures, to funding the basic services adults and children need to lead healthy and productive lives.

I will challenge our regional partners to commit to building a more equitable and sustainable regional community. Washington and Clackamas counties represent more than half of the population of the tri-county area, but provide less than a third of the affordable housing.

I will lead the City Council to invest in long-term, cost-effective programs to lift people out of poverty, strengthen neighborhoods, and eliminate disparities. While the city faces big cuts to its budget, we must preserve safety net programs and services for our most vulnerable.

But even this will not be enough. The

time has come to rally the community to support a new dedicated funding source to support this vital work.

Partnerships

Portland cannot be successful without strong partnerships. We all have an important role to play, whether it's churches offering shelter to homeless families; outreach workers from JOIN saving lives on the streets; Mercy Corps supporting entrepreneurs in struggling neighborhoods; or local governments working together to streamline the delivery of basic services that help people achieve self-sufficiency. When government, the faith community, businesses and non-profits link arms, we can change lives and the direction of our city.

Opportunity

While many neighborhoods in Portland are thriving, poverty continues to hold too many of our families back. In a time of limited resources, we must act intentionally to extend the benefits of a livable community to everyone, in every part of our city.

We will invest in strong neighborhoods to ensure that they include affordable homes and remain open to all, and we will invest in struggling neighborhoods to provide decent and quality homes for families at every income level.

This week, the City Council voted to support neighborhood urban renewal districts, which will bring new resources to places like Parkrose and Cully. The newly-created Office of Equity will help all of us be more accountable. And through our budget decisions, we should and must invest in areas of our city which are falling behind.

By talking openly about the needs we face, we can begin to address them more equitably, building a stronger, more prosperous Portland.

Conclusion

Our success is measured in the lives we change, not in the plans we issue or the policies we write.

Recently, a resident of Chaucer Court, an apartment building the city helped to preserve, shared his personal story with me: "I looked up one day and I had run out of road ... I realized I was facing a truly horrible future; that my ascending years would be fraught with struggle just to exist. (Thanks to Transition Projects) I went literally from a place of darkness to the joy of a new beginning. ... It is fair and accurate to say that what has been provided to me ... is nothing short of a miracle."

His story is our story: of new beginnings, and of occasional miracles.

I am honored and grateful to work with so many dedicated partners. Special thanks to the employees of the Portland Housing Bureau, our new leader, Director Traci Manning, and our honor roll of government partners: Mary McBride at HUD; Margaret Van Vliet at the State; Commissioner Deborah Kafoury at Multnomah County; and Lee Moore and Steve Rudman at Home Forward.

As a city commissioner, I am guided by a simple conviction: that everyone in our community, regardless of income, status or zip code, deserves a safe and decent place to call home.

Together, we achieve success one person, one family at a time.

To learn more about the budget process and city's housing budget, go to www.portlandonline.com/phb/index.cfm?&c=32341

Vendors are regular contributors to Street Roots content, as columnist, poets and artists. Look for your favorite vendor's writings in each edition of the paper.