

City, county and metro officials plot housing summit for fall

BY ALEX ZIELINSKI
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If there is one substantial step forward to come out of Cameron Whitten's hunger strike for housing equity, it is the announcement of a regional conference on housing and homelessness.

Fifty-five days after the start of his hunger strike, activist and former mayoral candidate Whitten — now nearly 35 pounds lighter — surrendered on Thursday, July 26 to Mayor Sam Adam's announcement of a fall regional housing summit.

Held by the Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, the summit will bring the city, county and Metro governments together to address how the tri-county area can work together on housing and homeless issues.

A letter fused together by Mayor Adams, Whitten and city staff released highlights the summit's main goals: "We believe solving our local housing challenges is best accomplished with a stronger regional partnership involving advocates, agencies, non-profit and faith communities, and people experiencing homelessness. After the November elections is an opportune time to take a new look at regional homeless and affordable housing issues, as we welcome newly elected leaders to the table."

Nick Fish, Portland's city commissioner in charge of housing, says the forum will bring together the major players to examine issues of funding and regional equity throughout Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties.

"We're a little less than half the population of the tri-county region, and yet we're 70 percent of the housing dollars," Fish said. "We're proud of our leadership role. On the other hand, homelessness is not unique to Portland, and it's going to be important over time that everybody in the

region participates fully."

Since 2008, when Fish took office, the city has spent \$215 million local dollars addressing affordable housing and homelessness, Fish said. "That's a phenomenal commitment, and it dwarfs what we get from the federal government, and we have to be intentional about it."

The city and county have long worked in tandem on providing housing and support services, and including Metro will incorporate zoning and urban growth policies to the discussion. Sam Chase, recently elected Metro councilor, said he's excited to be involved in a more overarching project that involves Metro's input.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity to address these issues regionally," Chase, whose campaign platform was based on housing equity, said. "I think that alignment among political leaders who really want to get something done is key. It's not about my ideas, it's about working together as a team."

For City Commissioner Amanda Fritz, the collaboration between governments will hopefully help disperse funding. "The county and the city have been shouldering funding for housing projects over the years," Fritz said. "Now having Metro involved, we need to have a conversation about equitable funding and take advantage of any services they can provide."

With such an overarching mission — tackling regional housing issues — it's hard to say what solid solutions will come out of the summit. While Fritz sees women's issues a top priority, Chase has his eye on permit consolidation and system development changes. Multnomah County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury just wants cheap housing. "No matter what comes out of the summit, this is going to be a big step

forward."

A mutual pursuit is developing cemented ideas to push along to the state, if not federal, legislature. But the day-long summit itself will determine the specific nature of these measures.

"The summit doesn't have an agenda, at least that I know of," Fritz said. "The point is to brainstorm, ask questions. What are the potential strategies we can use to make changes? Should we have a housing levee? How can we make this a regional priority? These are the things we need to ask."

Whitten, 21, held a press conference outside of City Hall on July 26 to address the conclusion of his 55-day hunger strike in which he lost nearly 35 pounds. The summit was among the key victories he claimed emerged from his protest against housing injustice.

Whitten started his hunger strike and 24-hour demonstration outside City Hall with three demands: that the Bureau of Development Services waive fines levied on the owners of the property where Right 2 Dream Too is established, for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Department to issue a one-year moratorium on foreclosure evictions for homeowners, and for City Council to add a housing levy measure to the November 2012 General Election ballot.

While none of those issues were resolved,

Fritz said in her statement that they would be discussed in the future.

"In addition to the summit, the city is engaged in ongoing conversations about the futures of Right 2 Dream Too and Dignity

Village. When the time is right, we believe a future City Council will support a public vote on a new dedicated funding source for affordable housing."

And for Whitten, the summit is definitely a step in the right direction. But was this kind of all-inclusive housing discussion inevitable regardless of Whitten's strike?

Kafoury says that while the region was "heading that way," Whitten's efforts highlighted housing

and homelessness issues. Fritz echoed Kafoury's views.

"The issues were out there, but Cameron's demonstration made it more urgent," Fritz said. "However, we have other ways than hunger striking to ask for things like this. Potentially killing yourself for Portland politics is not the way to go."

Either way, Chase said that Portland's overdue for this type of discussion. "Don't get me wrong, we've done a lot of good things to work towards housing equity," Chase said. "But we still have a lot of work left to do."

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— CITY COMMISSIONER AMANDA FRITZ



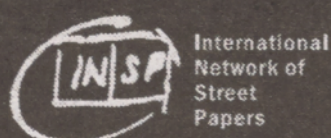
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