

EDITORIAL

Let's not sacrifice vision for vitriol in homeless debate

The true colors of many people who are in charge of and influence public safety and policy have been rising to the service.

Lets start with civility. That was the topic of a recent summit that brought together policy makers, students, businesses, nonprofits and individuals from law enforcement community. The presentation was meant to educate the public and to spur action on a range of issues related to the issues of livability.

It was disastrous. Presenters from Mercy Corps, Julia West House, Travel Portland and others spent the better part of an hour and a half faulting people who are experiencing homelessness, going so far as to say that services offered to people in Portland prolong people's poverty. One presenter compared Portland today to New York City in the 1980s — a crime infested urban environment that was on the brink of total collapse unless action was taken.

This conversation came only days before a hearing on Right 2 Dream Too at City Hall, where well-intentioned Portlanders berated the homeless people working to improve their own living conditions on the streets. People experiencing homelessness were referred to in the hearing as being little more than sex offenders, drug addicts and a complete drain on society.

It doesn't help to have policy makers fueling the rhetoric as they claim to be addressing the lawlessness that is supposedly our streets, promising to do something about it.

Instead of talking about a public health crisis, compassion and the need for both traditional and non-traditional partners to take on the issue of homelessness and housing, we have individuals with dinosaur-like philosophies working to create policies that will do nothing more than split our community and set us back in the fight against poverty.

We aren't Detroit, or St. Louis, or Memphis, or New York City in the 1980s. We're Portland, Oregon, in the early 21st century. A place that is experiencing overwhelming economic growth and prosperity. We are experiencing record numbers of affluent people moving into and visiting our city. We are experiencing a changing landscape.

It's time for civic leaders throughout our city to recognize that decades-old philosophies around urban planning and the poor don't stand a chance unless we work together and stop demonizing people.

We would also caution those leaders not to take us back to a time when Portland was divided and when ideological lines in the sand and dogma prevailed over partnerships and vision.

Street Roots looks forward to working with a wide range of partners to create a more livable and safe downtown in Portland, and to offer resources to people experiencing poverty.

We do not look forward to continuing to watch people experiencing poverty be publically demonized and used as a social whipping post simply because they are poor.

Our mission

Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by producing a newspaper and other media that are catalysts for individual and social change.

Street Roots publishes every two weeks, launching on Fridays, and is available exclusively through our street vendors or by subscription. We are proud members of the North American Street Newspaper Association and the International Network of Street Papers.

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There is much to celebrate — and work toward

Street Roots is currently participating on a committee convened by Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman and County Commissioner Deborah Kafoury to

determine where \$1.7 million should go to support housing and homeless services.

It's great to think that the city of Portland may choose to dedicate this money toward homeless and housing services at this time,

especially given that the mayor has signaled that it's time to start paying off debt and saving for a rainy day.

Luckily, we have elected leaders in Portland who realize that thousands of people sleeping on our streets are in a very vulnerable state.

Only a few weeks ago, one of our vendors experienced a domestic violence crisis. Street Roots spent the afternoon with the woman, trying to connect her with services. We know the gauntlet. It's not an easy one.

After trying for hours to find a place to sleep that night she was told that she was number 122 on a waiting list at the local emergency women's shelter. "One-hundred and twenty-two. That's crazy," I said to myself.

After making further inquiries about the emergency women's shelter later that week I was shocked and believe me, nothing is shocking in my world. There are currently two emergency women's shelters available. The waitlist is a combined 338 women in crisis. You've got to be kidding me.

I suppose I knew it all along. There are thousands of people sleeping on our streets. Maybe it was something about that particular day, or watching our staff try to help a vendor find a safe place to sleep — to get away from her perpetrator, only to have to sleep in a doorway that night. It left me angry.

Unfortunately, we see this kind of trauma and tragedy every single day. We become numb to it at times. It's a dangerous place to be.

We haven't seen that vendor since that

day. We all wonder if she's OK.

The proposed \$1.7 million sounds like a lot of money, but when thinking about how to disperse that money, it's apparent that the system is stretched thin.

Should we allocate funds to just women and children? Should we use the funds to support mental health programs? Should we think about how to serve the youth population? Should we try to make a big splash in one certain area or spread the dollars out over the entire continuum? Will city hall support the recommendations we come up with? We hope so.

We know that in the coming months and years that to get back to funding levels seen before the recession and before a Congress that has gone absolutely batshit crazy on us, that we have work to do.

The conversation about homelessness (see editorial) and public opinion has gone sideways on us. Instead of hearing smart and educated people talk about everyone needing a safe place to call home, or having compassion for our residents, we hear words such as lawlessness, the need for sidewalk laws, and the lack of civility on our streets. Compassion fatigue looms.

Street Roots, being the constant optimist, still believes all is not lost. The reality is, we're making some great strides and there's reason for hope. It may not feel like it at times, but it's true.

Just yesterday, one of our vendors got off the phone and did a little dance. "I'm finally getting health care. I'm getting health care. Thank you Mr. President." Yes!

Watching the vendor stroll through the office with a new sense of being, it struck me that while we struggle at a systems level to get things right, individually and collectively we are making great strides — both big and small.

The simple fact that over the next two years, the majority of people on the streets will be able to access health care is a lifetime achievement for all of us. Having a local government that believes in prioritizing people is not a given. It's a game changer. It's something we can all celebrate.



Israel Bayer is the executive director of Street Roots. You can reach him at israel@streetroots.org or follow him on Twitter @israelbayer.

DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Send letters to the editor to Street Roots, 211 NW Davis St., Portland, OR 97209, or e-mail to joanne@streetroots.org.

Grateful Dead

By Anonymous

The experience of my life has been a mixed bag.

The small details aren't so important, as to the message of the lessons learned.

In my reality, there have been times of pain, loneliness, and following others, to nowhere. At 40 years old, I believe I'm at long last, starting to blaze my own path.

Not too far from you, just far enough to give a sense of myself, and the freedom I feel when making my own responsible choices, and outcomes.

Now my choices manifest in my kids.

Almost as if I get to start all over.

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Street Roots Rose City Resource

Street Roots publishes the Rose City Resource, a comprehensive booklet of services for people experiencing homelessness and poverty. To inquire about getting guides, call 503-228-5657. Resources are also available online at www.rosecityresource.org.

Vendors

Street Roots vendors buy the newspapers for 25 cents each and sell them for \$1, keeping the 75 cents in profit for themselves. In order to keep the cost low to our vendors, we receive additional support from donations and in-kind contributions.



75¢

goes directly to the vendor who sold you the paper

25¢

goes toward printing costs

Vendor orientations are at 1 p.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at the Street Roots office.