

EDITORIAL

Improvements welcome, but new water bureaucracy is not

Portland's water and sewer bureaus have an interesting year ahead of them. Alleged illegal use of ratepayer funds, controversial expenses on projects seemingly beyond the scope of the bureau's mission, along with questionable public recourse on rate decisions, have residents crying foul of the current system that charges one of the highest combined sewer and water bills in the nation.

So it's no wonder Portlanders have taken to finding a better alternative to managing our water.

Unfortunately, we haven't gotten there yet.

The movement to create a Portland Public Water District has turned in more than 50,000 signatures — out of a required 30,000 — to get on the ballot in May. The measure would create a new, independent bureaucracy, the Portland Public Water District, to take control of the city's water and sewer operations away from City Council.

Part of the pitch is that the seven-member, all-volunteer board will be elected by zones, not at-large like City Council, and in the absence of other political influences, will be more accountable to the public. But the parameters almost guarantee special interests will run, including representatives from the corporate interests who have the time and resources — and lack of water bureau experience — to assume the volunteer position. The elections would also be off-year races, which attract a small fraction of attention and eligible voters to the polls.

But even more so than the concept of an independent board, it is the high rates that are the crux of the pitch, and without making promises, so is the suggestion that reining in control will reverse the trend and lower costs to ratepayers. Perhaps, but the bulk of those rate increases can be traced directly to \$1.8 billion for the federally mandated "big pipe," plus hundreds of millions in other major projects to upgrade the city's aging water and sewer system in tune with the region's environmental sensibilities. The controversial spending on frivolous projects, however egregious, isn't the driver here.

Also, within the utilities' costs are programs for low-income ratepayers to help preserve their water service during tough times, and for environmental projects that pay it forward by keeping our natural resources among the best in the world. No environmental group has come forward supporting this initiative. This initiative is propped up by corporate and industrial interests, not the general populous — low-income or otherwise.

Yes, there are problems now, but this isn't the solution. Nonetheless, this initiative can have a major impact in spurring on more responsive and responsible utility oversight, and some steps have been taken in that direction. We can improve the system from the inside out, with transparency and accountability under a City Council responsible for the full complexity of the city's resources, environment and social needs.

Make a big impact on the world, grassroots on up

People often ask me, what motivated you to get into this line of work and to be engaged with politics. There's a lot of different ways I could answer that question.

Growing up in rural-industrial America, my first relationship to anything even remotely political was being a pot advocate. In my late teens, I was arrested for marijuana and spent a night in jail

in rural Missouri. I stood before a county judge, telling him why I thought the legalization of marijuana was critical to the nation's economy and that I wasn't hurting anyone by smoking pot (Something I still believe.) He laughed, gave me a fine and told me never to come back to his county. Fair enough.

In my early 20s, I accidentally went to jail for nearly a week in Seattle during the WTO protests. When I say accidentally, I mean, I wasn't exactly planning on going to jail that week. I'm glad I did. For six days, a colorful group of activists and many others who had intended to get arrested held hour-long long teach-ins in the cellblock on a number of important topics about social justice. Each night when the lights went out, a rabbi told the history and struggle of the Jewish people. It was an important moment in my life. It was during those nights, and listening to the rabbi talk, that I decided to dedicate my life to working towards creating social change.

It took a long time before I actually found my voice. At the time, I didn't really know how to write or to express myself. I had no education past the 11th grade and my existence up until that point has been spent on drug induced quests, trying to find the meaning of life and working graveyards at convenient stores in cities.

I could have gone in many directions at that time. I questioned my value as a human being. What was I giving, what was I taking? How could just one person make a difference? Like so many young, low-income people, I was mad at the world and mad at the injustices taking place in my community and beyond. I wanted to do something about it, but didn't exactly know how that might

take shape.

At the time, the late '90s, there was a real charge in the air. The anti-globalization movement had wings. The labor movement was growing. The environmental movement was raging, organizations such as Dignity Village and Street Roots were born. Young people across the Northwest were becoming politically engaged and believed together that real change was on the horizon.

Then, like a flash before all of our eyes, those planes plowed into the World Trade Center, killing thousands of people. Wars were launched and the rest is history.

We're lucky enough in Portland to still live in a place where political dialogue, innovation and working to create social change are a fabric in our community. While the anti-globalization movement may have imploded, the idea of working towards creating real, grassroots change still has legs.

More importantly, many of the questions that I believe young people ask themselves, like where is my place in all of this and how do I work to create lasting change in the community, aren't answered in a vacuum. It takes having life experiences along with many mentors and if you're lucky enough a support system.

In short, it takes a village.

So when did I turn into my father rambling on about the sixties and Reagan the whole thing being completely rigged? Apparently, right now.

When social work students ask me for advice about the social service field I often tell them that unless you're taking an administrative track, want to be a career bureaucrat and/or you have a family to feed, than you'd be better off by starting your own venture or working for a small grassroots organization.

Your friends might think you're crazy. You're family will most likely question your motives, and may not support you at all. You may make a fool of yourself on more than one occasion and possibly fail. I have many times.

So when people ask me why I got into this line of work or engaged in politics, I realize that they aren't really asking me, but actually themselves. And since they're asking the question, deep down they probably already know the answer.



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DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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

Beneath the Bridges

by Don Hynes

Tell me your story and I'll listen,
I've stopped thinking
To make you whole,
Your patched cloth
Enough for the day,
The mended seam
Your strength.
You will speak

And I will hear
The broken hopes
Of your tin can home,
Your ruined dreams
Beneath the bridges
And many places
You wander alone.

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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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.