

Charles Jordan's passing a cause for reflection — and action

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This month saw the passing of one of Portland's greatest. Former City Commissioner Charles Jordan passed away at the beginning of April at the age of 77. Jordan was a city commissioner for 10 years and later directed the city's Park and Recreation Bureau for 14 years before retiring in 2003.

First elected to City Council in 1974, Jordan was widely known as the commissioner who took Portland's parks to the next level. Jordan's legacy is built on his ability to increase access to parks and recreation for all and his commitment to environmental stewardship and conservation. He was seen as a visionary who played a major role in creating Portland's livability.

In addition to all of his achievements as a city commissioner and director of the Parks Bureau, Jordan was also the first and only African American to serve on Portland's City Council. Even though Jordan left City Council 30 years ago, no other African American has managed to get elected to City Council since. The fact that Jordan has been the only African American elected to City Council suggests a very disturbing history of one of United States' most progressive, and also whitest cities.

Portland was founded in 1851, since then, only seven women have served on the City Council. Three of them happened to be mayors. And Jordan is the only person of color elected to City Council.

Compared to the city, the county has fared much better in achieving diverse representation. Since 1974, 25 women have been elected to the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners. There have even been brief periods of time where the entire County Commission was made up of women. More people of color have served on the County Commission than City Council as well (though most would admit there's still room for improvement.)

So why the discrepancy? Why has the county achieved much more diverse representation than the City? The answer lies in the way the election maps are drawn. Multnomah County follows a traditional model of splitting up the county election map into districts, with each district voting on who they want to represent their particular district on the County Commission. Portland however, divides the electoral map in a much different way.

Portland's model of governance is

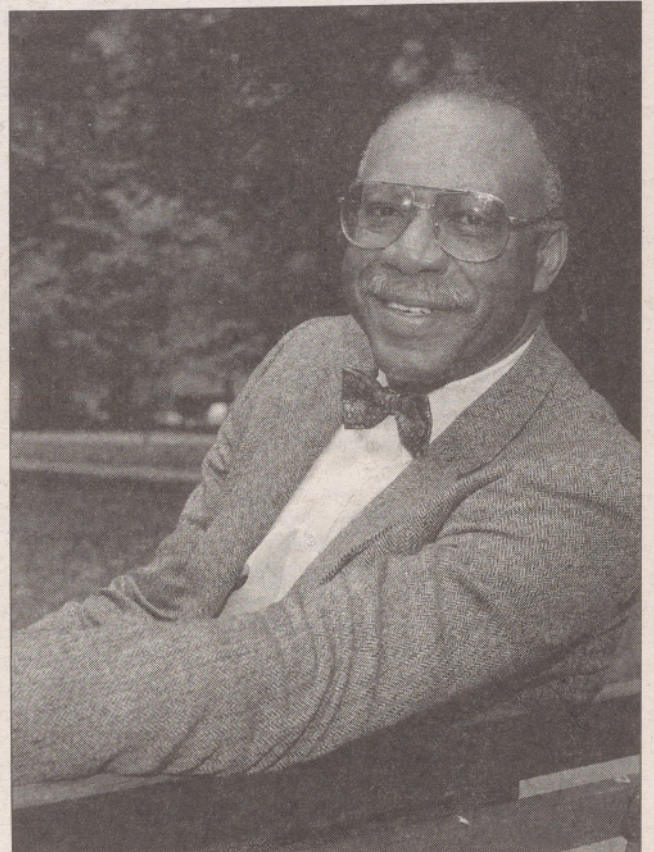
unique. Most cities as large or larger than Portland have more of a strong mayor system where the mayor runs the city and the city council acts more as a legislative body. Portland is different; we have a commissioner form of government, which means that the city council actually runs the city. Commissioners run the bureaus with the mayor.

Our commissioner-style of governments means that we elect all of our City Council members at-large: The entire city votes to elect each commissioner. This is very different from nearly every other city of equal or greater size to Portland. Most cities have better direct representation, dividing the city into districts or wards. The thought is the issues may be different in different parts of the city and more direct representation ensures that those needs and issues are being addressed.

This matters because it is much harder to get elected citywide than it would be for a particular district. To run a citywide campaign and win, you have to raise (or be willing to personally spend) the large sums of money required to campaign in every neighborhood across the city. Obviously, the requirement of raising large sums of money makes it enormously difficult to run for office. Women and people of color typically have less access to the downtown donor base that often writes the large campaign checks required to run a successful citywide campaign.

Additionally, the barriers of running for citywide office are magnified if you live east of 82nd Avenue. City demographic data shows that neighborhoods east of 82nd Avenue are getting more and more diverse. To date, Portlanders have never elected a mayor who has lived east of 60th Avenue.

If we are serious about increasing the diversity of people elected to the city council, we need to look at the institutional barriers that keep women and people of color from getting elected. No barrier is harder to overcome than the at-large election map. We should change it, and in so doing, join nearly every other large city in America by going to a more direct form of representation. Not only can we increase the diversity on the City Council, but our neighborhoods will be better served by being represented by someone who lives there and understands their issues first hand. Charles Jordan's recent passing is cause for a reflection and celebration of his legacy, but it is also a call to action as well.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF PORTLAND PARKS & RECREATION, PORTLAND, OR
Charles Jordan, at top and above with park-goers, played a dynamic role in shaping Portland's parks.

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