

Candidate Q&A Affordable Housing

Commissioner Dan Saltzman and his challenger Nicholas Caleb are running Portland Commissioner No. 3. Street Roots posed three questions to the candidates on housing and homelessness.

Street Roots: Portland is experiencing an affordable housing crisis. The affordable housing inventory in the city's core continues to shrink despite a promise to preserve those units. Meanwhile, the waiting list for a low-income apartment remains very long or closed. What are your ideas to increase the amount of affordable housing for the lowest-income households in Portland?

Dan Saltzman: One new way to create more low-income affordable housing and resources is through an Affordable Housing Incentive Zoning program. The city currently has incentive zoning programs but none that are focused exclusively on affordable housing. This development incentive will create more affordable units, but it will also create funding for low-income housing investments. I will ask my City Council colleagues to support such a program next month.

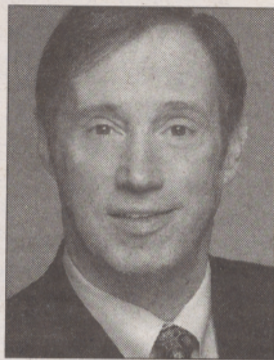
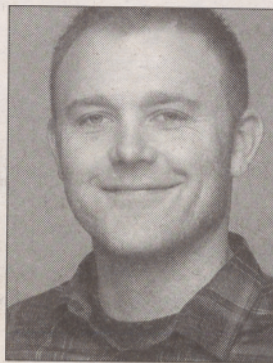
We also need to be smarter about how we make our investments in affordable housing. We need to be focused on lowering the cost per unit for affordable housing. This year, for the first time, I have directed the housing bureau to have maximum-cost thresholds for its investments. In addition, we need to be acquiring and rehabilitating existing housing stock and turning it into affordable housing. The acquisition and rehabilitation of affordable housing is more than 50 percent less expensive than building new units. Finally, we need to plan for an affordable housing trust fund which would blend public and private resources to fund affordable and low-income housing for generations to come.

Nicholas Caleb: Portland Metro has one of the lowest rental vacancy rates in the country, and it's no coincidence that homelessness has been on the rise at the same time. We need to take aggressive action, including rent controls and anti-gentrification policies to keep lower-income Portlanders from being priced out of their own neighborhoods and losing their homes.

The Portland Development Commission's refusal to consider community demands for affordable housing to be included in a recently proposed subsidy to Trader Joe's in Northeast Portland was a potent reminder that we need better oversight on public development spending. The money would be better spent on affordable housing than on deep land discounts and subsidies for a well-funded corporation. Otherwise, we can expect to see more "affordable housing" projects like the infamous Headwaters development, occupied by tenants who are not actually living in poverty. More development money should be spent on rent-controlled, truly affordable housing which is

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Nicholas Caleb is a Concordia University professor who teaches government, cultural geography, environmental sciences, introductory biology, environmental negotiations and speech.



"We need to plan for an affordable housing trust fund which would blend public and private resources to fund affordable and low-income housing for generations to come."

Dan Saltzman is currently serving his fourth term as a Portland City Commissioner. He currently manages the Portland Housing Bureau, Portland Fire & Rescue, the Gateway Center for Domestic Violence Services and the Portland Children's Levy.

accessible to those who need it most, instead of what is most profitable for big developers.

The mayor's recent announcement of \$20 million in additional funds for affordable housing in the Interstate Urban Renewal Area is welcome news, as communities of color continue to disproportionately suffer from gentrification and displacement.

However, it should not be funded at the cost of trimming other affordable housing projects from the budget. The level of oversight and accountability in allocating development resources to affordable housing projects has deteriorated, and we need to make sure we are directing our resources to meet our most urgent needs in providing affordable housing.

We need to address the crisis of affordable housing both as a problem of supply and a problem of poverty wages. As we work to improve access to affordable housing we need to be working to mandate a \$15-an-hour minimum wage to keep precariously housed, low-wage workers and their families off the streets and free up funding to invest in affordable housing. Fifteen dollars an hour would likely lift tens of thousands of working Portlanders out of poverty, help protect communities of color from gentrification and displacement, and provide meaningful support to the women who make up almost two-thirds of the minimum-wage workforce. While we certainly need to take meaningful action on increasing affordable housing stock, we also need to take action to increase how much underpaid low-wage Portlanders can afford.

Street Roots: From the media to political insiders to concerned Portlanders, everyone has an opinion about how to end homelessness. What will you specifically do to build the political support in the community to tackle the issue?

Dan Saltzman: I have a history of building support for issues that affect those most in need in our community. To illustrate this I would point to my involvement in the establishment, renewal and expansion of the Portland Children's Levy. The Levy has produced results that have benefited thousands of Portland's children and families.

As Portland's Housing Commissioner, I want to see housing justice and that those who are experiencing homelessness are not viewed as though they are committing a crime. It's going to take establishing a broad coalition to create a consciousness around the importance of housing justice. To do this we must eliminate polarizing rhetoric and focus on real actions and real results.

I intend to do this by working with a wide variety of stakeholders including business groups, nonprofit service providers and, most importantly, with those who are experiencing homelessness. I believe this approach is the best course to build support on issues surrounding homelessness, and I have the track record to make it happen.

Nicholas Caleb: Any unhoused person or advocate could tell you that there is no one narrative that accurately captures the many different experiences of unhoused people. Our solutions to this problem cannot be "one size fits all" if we expect to succeed. As we work to help unhoused Portlanders transition back inside and work toward self-sufficiency to the best of their ability, we need to take immediate action to end the criminalization of homelessness in Portland.

The findings in the Western Regional Advocacy Project's survey of homeless people on their experiences with police, private security and the criminal justice system speak for themselves. Overwhelming majorities of surveyed homeless people reported, "being harassed, cited or arrested" for "sleeping, sitting or lying on the sidewalk or loitering or hanging out. Only 26 percent of the respondents said they knew of a safe place to sleep at night." I am proud to announce that Caleb for Council has endorsed WRAP and its Homeless Bill of Rights Campaign for Oregon. We should work to craft policy on the city level, inspired by the solutions organizations like WRAP have identified to ensure Portlanders are not harassed and arrested simply for

experiencing homelessness. All Portlanders have a right to the city. We need to stop spending public dollars on enforcing policies that undermine unhoused people's ability to survive day to day, as when vital personal items such as blankets and even medication are confiscated during campsite sweeps.

Criminalization of homelessness is inhumane, does nothing to solve the problem of homelessness, and damages the city's credibility with the very people we're attempting to help. Reviving sit-lie and attempting to address this issue through the Police Bureau with policies such as Prosper Portland can only damage attempts to work equitably with a diverse group of stakeholders to find solutions responsive to the diversity of needs among unhoused people. Wealthy developers have had disproportionate influence compared to unhoused people and advocacy organizations in Right 2 Dream Too's ongoing negotiations with the City of Portland. We need to correct this disparity in access to better address the diversity of ways in which Portlanders experience homelessness in partnership with the community from the bottom up.

Street Roots: What is the city doing right and what is it doing wrong in terms how it's prioritizing the use of taxpayers money on the issue of housing and homelessness?

Dan Saltzman: We need to do a better job of acquiring and maintaining accurate data that can drive our investments in housing and homelessness programs. The city's homeless programs and the practices of our nonprofit partners are among the best practices in the country. The problem is that we don't have the adequate resources to meet the needs of those on our streets. I am committed to continuing to find more resources and obtaining the data we need to allocate resources to our needs.

Nicholas Caleb: For all the issues at work in the process, that the city is continuing to work with Right 2 Dream Too is a step in the right direction. We need to be doing more to support and expand successful, cost-effective and innovative community solutions like the rest area model Right 2 Dream Too has developed, and supporting effective community-driven organizations and solutions will allow us to better serve the diversity of individual needs among people experiencing homelessness.

Even within the status quo we can improve our prioritization of public money. Not only do we not have enough shelter space to meet the needs of our homeless population, with punishingly long waiting lists, but also we do a particularly poor job in providing access for women and families. We need to address this disparity in our existing safety net services. We should prioritize housing-first policies, which have consistently reduced chronic homelessness and public spending on health care and incarceration, along with arrests for offenses associated with criminalized homelessness. It is less expensive to house unhoused people with supportive social services than it is to criminalize them, hospitalize them and neglect their needs (as Utah recently discovered).

More broadly, the deficiencies in our social safety net reflect poor priorities in the city's use of taxpayer money in general. City Council members should not be accepting money from wealthy corporations like Nike and offering them millions in tax breaks and subsidies behind closed doors while we are struggling to meet profound and urgent human needs with too little funding. We should not be tolerating anything less than living wages from large corporate employers so we can save taxpayer money that would have gone to subsidizing poverty wages and put those savings toward ensuring housing justice. I will not accept any corporate money and have limited all donors to \$50 cash contributions and so will not be beholden to wealthy interests in prioritizing funding on housing, homelessness or any other issue.

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public and insiders both know is that there are not enough resources available to tackle the issues of homelessness and poverty in our community. What are the answers?

In the short-term, the Women Into Housing Now program and the \$1.7 million going toward vulnerable people on the streets should be continued.

The metro region should also be dreaming bigger. It's easy to think that homelessness and housing programs are always getting money when you read the headlines, but the reality is we're begging for crumbs and our system is slapped together with a hodge-podge of different funding mechanisms that don't equal actually tackling the program.

It's time for our region to act. Sure, we could get bogged down in conversations and petty politics about what is the best

path forward, but it's going to take real leadership to actually make it happen. Who among our elected officials has got what it takes to actual move on creating some kind of ongoing recourse to support housing in our community at the level we need?

The reality is that woman and children on the streets endure great pain, both mentally and physically. They remain strong in the face of overwhelming odds. It's time for our elected leaders to show the same kind of fortitude as the group of women working together to remain safe on the streets.

"My experience has been hell," one of the women told me. "I don't have all the answers, but I do know that no one in their right mind would let hundreds of women sleep on the streets. Where's the leadership in this city?"

I would have to agree. Where is the leadership?