

EDITORIAL

Street fee tax needs broad community support

Portland needs better roads and transportation services, and short of money, there's no easy answer to how to make it happen. But we need a better plan than the proposed Street Fee racing through City Hall.

The flat, regressive fee on households and businesses is a poor tool for fiscal management and puts yet another bill on the books for families who, after paying their taxes, their mortgage or rent, and their bills, don't have much left to hand over to a government bureaucracy.

The proposal from Transportation Commissioner Steve Novick would charge \$12 a month for households, and \$8 a month for low-income households: \$144 and \$96 a year, respectfully.

The best outcome we can hope for is that a proposal like this develops a broad coalition of support from the community that can deliver a message that the public can understand and support.

Businesses will take an even bigger hit, in some cases much bigger.

We question not only the fee structure but also the need. No question, money is needed, but from where and for what?

In the first few days of Mayor Charlie Hales administration, the City Auditor released its audit of the Portland Bureau of Transportation, calling it out for a lack of a long-term strategy on transportation priorities and budgeting. As a result, "new transportation projects have displaced core services such as maintaining streets." Despite an increase in transportation revenue — yes, it's been rising since 2008 to beyond pre-recession revenues — the bureau reduced its funding in contract paving work and street maintenance. Instead, money was increased for projects such as the east side Streetcar and debt service on the Downtown Transit Mall and the Portland Milwaukie Light Rail line.

It's being sold as a safety issue, but the fee is largely to backfill maintenance costs.

Are there valid safety concerns rolled into the commissioner's argument? Absolutely. There are too many dark intersections and missing sidewalks throughout the city, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods. But is this the "crisis" that the mayor is purporting to compel or justify support for a new tax?

There is no question that PBOT needs financial support. But we cannot support a flat fee of this size with no end in sight that will disproportionately hurt low-income families and small businesses regardless of their use on the roads.

There's no question there's work to do to bridge the gap between transportation needs and people experiencing poverty. The best outcome we can hope for is that a proposal like this develops a broad coalition of support from the community that can deliver a message that the public can understand and support.

City, county can do more with short-term rental tax

It's no secret that Portland is experiencing rapid growth. Neighborhoods in downtown and in Portland's inner core are booming. Many local businesses are thriving. All one has to do to experience the prosperity is spend a night in any number of Portland

neighborhoods to see that the whiskey is flowing and life is good.

The landlords and developers have to be happy. The machinery behind tens of millions of dollars have come barreling out of the recession through new

urban renewal districts. Those lucky enough to have survived the Great Recession are now sitting on a gold mine. The vacancy rates are virtually nil and you've got to believe that the increased rents around the region are making for a great payday for the handful of investors who have the resources to pay to play. Good on them.

Next month the City of Portland will consider legalizing more short-term rental units for local homeowners and landlords. Is this a good thing? Depends on your perspective. Companies such as Airbnb and VRBO help facilitate renting thousands of homes, or dwellings to visitors for 30 days or less. Many of those rentals are for very short periods of time, like an extended weekend. The company takes a cut from each of the transactions and homeowners and landlords benefit from the rental. With the arrival of Airbnb to Portland, the city and county intend to apply its standard lodging tax to those short-term rentals.

Currently, the county allocates \$250,000 of the money collected in lodging fees toward housing programs to support hard working Portlanders. Now, Commissioner Dan Saltzman is proposing taking 25 percent of the revenue made from taxing these short-term rentals and putting it toward a new affordable housing fund.

Awesome you say? Yes, but there's more. At least there should be more — money, that is — from these new rentals going toward

the housing fund from both the city and county.

Former Housing Commissioner Erik Sten once told me the thing he appreciates most about Street Roots is that every time the city allocates more resources toward housing and homeless services, we always thank the city kindly and then immediately point out that we should be doing more and that it's simply not enough.

We are certainly behind Housing Commissioner Dan Saltzman and County Chair Marissa Madrigal for supporting a vast array of housing services, including allocating money from this specific program. But hey, let's be honest. We should be doing more.

Here's what we know.

Portland is down about 20,000 affordable housing units. Thousands of people go without any kind of shelter at all. Rental prices are not going down anytime soon, in fact, they are skyrocketing. The city is experiencing unmitigated gentrification, pushing hardworking people of color and low-income folks out of the city's urban core. The resources we currently allocate toward the problem doesn't come close to solving it.

The majority of the money from the lodging taxes in Portland and Multnomah County go to the general fund. Considering the fiscal priorities given to tourism in this town, we should be investing more than a small percentage of that revenue to offset the displacement of residents.

County Chairwoman Deborah Kafoury recently said in debate at the City Club of Portland, "If somebody doesn't have an address to put on a job application, it really doesn't matter what the job is that they're applying for." And if we don't find a solution to the current housing crisis, people of color and low-income people won't be accessing our schools, parks, and the other treasures Portland has to offer either.

We have work to do. We're looking for our leaders to lead and to go big. It's what a thriving Portland deserves.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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

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

LETTER

Mothers' Day made special by the success of a son

Just a Mothers' Day thanks for all you do and for your mission, which reads: "Street Roots creates income opportunities for people experiencing homelessness and poverty by publishing a newspaper that is a catalyst for individual and social change."

A mother's answer: It works!

You gave my son, Scott, an opportunity to get back on his feet in 2009 when he became homeless on the Portland streets due to job layoffs and was losing what dignity he had left. You gave him a job as a Street Roots vendor. He made some life changes and he has been

driving for a local driving company in Portland since and has been living in Southwest Garden Home. He has been able to buy a car again and has not forgotten those life lessons then. You gave him hope when doors were closing on him and a job opportunity to start again.

Scott took me out for Mothers' Day to eat, and we humbly thanked God for your mission and what opportunities came his way to get him back on his feet again.

Thank you again so much!

JEANETTE
Scott Walden's Mother

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 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 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.