

City Council stands firm in URA housing vote

It was as if some long-lost, housing-positive energy descended upon City Hall this past Wednesday. It was the vote – or rather a series of votes – that reminded onlookers that housing for all once was – and should be again – a priority for our civic leaders,

EDITORIAL

developers and neighborhoods. It was a City Council decision to rededicate the North Macadam Urban Renewal Area – the last downtown URA with significant open land for housing development – to its original promise to include low-income housing. This URA is the city's funding mechanism behind the South Waterfront development, where high-end apartments are plentiful, with more coming every year. It has been a boon for developers and people who can shell out thousands each month for a small apartment.

But the city's low-income obligations to the URA funding – 270 low-income units – have never been met and were soon to be abandoned. The Portland Housing Bureau intended to drop its goal. It seemed the path of least resistance.

To Commissioner Nick Fish, who challenged the city's intended plan, this was like "lowering the river rather than raising the bridge." On Wednesday, the City Council passed his resolution to solidify its intent to actually build new affordable housing in the city's core. It was paired with a set of amendments to the city's URA policies, brought forth by Mayor Charlie Hales

that dedicate more tax revenue from that area to affordable housing.

Together, the City Council passed a collection of policies that will prioritize the largest, up-front chunk of change to build low-income housing this city has seen in years: \$47 million. It includes dedicated parcels of land and specific housing unit quotas that exceed initial URA goals. And it passed 5-0.

"It means housing went to the front of the line," Fish said after the meeting.

It's about time.

Outside the sandstone walls of City Hall, more and more Portlanders can't afford to live in this city, and it is on course to get much worse.

Incomes are moving at a glacial pace while housing costs – particularly for renters – are skyrocketing beyond any real logic. We live in a landlord economy. Family incomes are consumed by housing costs, not to mention older residents on fixed incomes.

During testimony for the resolution, speakers testified to the city's abysmal numbers: more than 20,000 units short for our lowest-income residents, while we enjoy a surplus of higher-income housing. Yes – a surplus. Even with vouchers for rent assistance, there simply aren't apartments available that people can afford.

The affordable housing units in North Macadam are years away, but at least now something will happen.

We're still waiting on the other 20,000.

Let's not lose our funk, Portland

Gentrification has been slowly eating away at our city for the past 20 years. Although during the past five years, with massive rental increases and the gap between the rich and the poor widening, doesn't it feel like we are on the verge of completely losing all of our funk?

By that, I mean our culture.

Some would say Israel, what are you talking about? Look at our city. We have an urban core filled with 15-minute neighborhoods with bustling restaurants, quaint cafes, microbreweries, great transportation, bike shops, spectacular parks and access to quality food.

That is, unless you are living in East Portland or are a low-income Portlander being pushed out of the city.

Obviously, people of color understand these realities at a very deep level.

"I use the word grief to explain what I think my mom and dad would be feeling right now," says former Oregon State Senator Avel Gordly in a recent and powerful short-film called "Future: Portland," produced by Oregon Humanities. "When I'm driving up Williams Avenue, I experience a physical pain."

"It was never intended that black people would enjoy living in this state at the end of the Oregon Trail," Gordly goes on to say in the film. "In fact, there were exclusion laws that said they couldn't. If you're looking at how a community will grow and prosper in a way that benefits everyone; if you continue on a trajectory, or a path that continues to exclude people based on race, ethnicity and income, that becomes an Achilles' heal. It will cripple and weaken all of the other so-called opportunities people are envisioning. You won't be able to get there because you have weakened one of the limbs that you need to travel on the path."

I was reminded of it this week when traveling early morning from North Portland to downtown on the Max. This particular train was full of white men and women

in khaki pants, business suits and the latest expensive cycling gear. There were no punk rockers or homeless people, no black folks or kids dressed in miss-matched secondhand clothes. There were no street musicians headed downtown to work for the day or construction workers in denims. There was no funk. Everyone on the train was perfectly comfortable in their conformity. It made me pause and think about Gordly's words more closely.

Understanding that many trains and buses throughout the city that day would be filled with a wide variety of people and cultures gave me hope. Still, it gave me pause, knowing that it was one example of how quickly we are becoming an urban core with less grit and soul.

Many of the challenges that we face in our community have to do with access to jobs, housing, equity and transportation. Until we have more resources and begin to regulate all of our urban planning with these specific lenses, poor and middle-class people are going to continue to be forced to abandon the urban core.

Which creates another set of problems. If we can't provide the necessary affordable housing in Portland's urban core, and we don't want to concentrate poverty in East Portland and Gresham, what are we going to do? Poor people can't simply disappear.

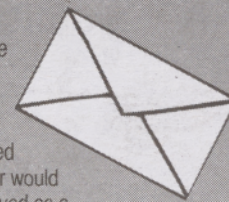
The sad reality is that the private market isn't required to do the right thing when it comes to poverty. There is money to be made and lots of it.

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. I mean, think about it. The Oregon Zoo is about to open a \$57 million dollar elephant exhibit, paid for largely by taxpayers, to house elephants for public viewing. Never mind that we haven't been able to find a pathway for long-term resources for housing Portland's own residents. Saying that, I've got absolutely nothing against elephants. I love them.

I suppose my point is this: Unless we get our priorities straight, Portland, we are going to lose our great city. A city that nurtures the funk and treasures it's own residents, regardless of their race and class.

Write in

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