

Federal government isn't solving big-picture problems, so maybe ...

It's up to City Hall

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The seasons are changing here in Portland. The sun is finally starting to shine with some consistency, the days are getting longer, the darkness is fading into winter's past, conversations on the proverbial patio have returned, and blossoms and pollen are everywhere. Winter is gone; summer is almost here.

Budget season is also heating up at the city of Portland, and with three incumbents (Amanda Fritz, Steve Novick and Charlie Hales) already declaring for re-election 18 months out, it must mean that as summer is almost upon us, so is the 2016 election season. The 2016 election is a presidential one, which promises to bring a lot of focus to big-picture issues such as income inequality, national security and the general direction of America. The issues that will likely drive the election for control of City Hall will likely include inequity, as manifested in the increasingly unaffordable housing options, transportation funding and continued police reform. This is good — all of these issues should receive a full and robust debate by all the candidates involved. These are the issues of the day. Some, like housing and transportation funding, are becoming harder and harder to solve, the longer we wait. It's time that we made a commitment to debate the issues and solve the problems.

However, while the election is likely to be dominated by talk about housing, transportation funding, planning and a host of other issues, this election should be focused on something more fundamental and more at the core of who we are as a city. Namely, the 2016 races for City Hall should focus on the role and responsibility of local government to solve the big problems of the day.

For the entire 20th century, large societal problems were solved at the federal level. President Theodore Roosevelt tackled monopolies and oligarchies with his famous "trust busting" crusade aimed at leveling the playing field for middle-class Americans. Franklin Delano Roosevelt radically remade government and reduced inequality through the New Deal. President Lyndon B. Johnson tried to complete the New Deal with his Great Society, which created Medicare and Medicaid. For generations, the federal government was where Americans could turn to for solutions to the biggest societal problems of the day.

But then something slowly started changing with the rise of Ronald Reagan.



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The federal government was looked at as more of the problem than the solution. States were the ones with the ability to solve the big problems of the day. Although this point of view started to take root in American government, it took several decades to become realized. That's because, despite rhetoric about how big government is the problem rather than the solution, federal money continued to flow back to districts at record levels through the appropriations process. Appropriations earmarked for Oregon by legislative giants such as Rep. Les AuCoin and Sens. Bob Packwood and Mark Hatfield ensured that, though small in stature, Oregon always received more than its fair share of federal tax dollars. Those tax dollars went to build things like Portland's light rail, highways and public universities. Earmarks started to receive intense scrutiny in the 2000s with things like Alaska's famous \$223 million "Bridge to Nowhere." Finally, when Republicans gained control of the House of Representatives in 2011, they banned all earmarks. This has greatly reduced the amount of federal money flowing to the state and local levels.

State and local governments rely heavily on federal funding. According to the Economic Policy Institute, federal grants to state and local governments across the country totaled \$607 billion. That amount, already significantly less than in years past, was cut again in perpetuity by sequestration. This left states and local governments scrambling to fill giant budget holes.

Additionally, Congress used to be a place where people could come together, set aside their differences and solve the large problems of the day. Now, however, Congress is completely dysfunctional and unable to solve any issue of real substance. And now, the federal money that used to flow to states and localities has been reduced, though the large problems of the day such as immigration reform, inequality, infrastructure funding, etc., remain. To recap: less federal money, more unsolved problems. Who will fill the void?

City Hall has already tried to solve some of these big problems that are usually reserved for the federal government. Over

the last two years, Commissioner Novick and Mayor Hales have tried to address the desperate need for more transportation revenue (a partial result of declining federal transportation funds) with various iterations of the proposed "Street Fee." More recently, the conversation around the "Ban the Box" campaign is Portland's attempt to do what it can to solve the nation's embarrassing and broken criminal justice system that, according to author Michelle Alexander in her erudite work, "The New Jim Crow," has created an entire subclass of young men of color destined to lives of grinding poverty and low wages due to nonviolent drug convictions.

All of this begs the fundamental question: What is the role of local government?

Traditionally, the role of local government was to provide for basic services like maintaining roads, streets and parks. The thornier, more esoteric questions of the day such as immigration reform, wealth disparity and skyrocketing cost of higher education were issues that were left to the federal government. But with the federal government abdicating its responsibility to solve these issues, the question remains: If not local governments, then who? But this is an incredibly difficult and nuanced debate.

Those advocating that local government ought to focus on basic services are correct; if City Hall isn't focused on our water and sewer rates, paving streets and maintaining parks, surely no one else will. But those advocating for a basic-services approach must answer the question, if not local governments, who will solve the deep and fundamental issues facing society today?

Cities all over the country are grasping with what the role of local government ought to be. Former Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak grew tired of waiting for Congress to solve the problem of skyrocketing tuition and crushing student debt that weighed on the hearts and minds of all of Minneapolis' best and brightest students. So he decided that the city could solve the problem by creating the "Minneapolis Promise," which raised an endowment for all students above a certain GPA requirement to go to community college for free. Minneapolis has done its part in solving the larger societal problem of the high cost of higher education by making it affordable for their students.

But those who see local government playing an activist role in solving the large issues of the day also need to acknowledge that this is a lot harder than it sounds. The city has an obligation to provide basic services that citizens rely on. It somehow has to balance the need to take care of the basics with solving the larger problems. This is incredibly difficult and requires disciplined leadership, a vision, voter buy-in and a disregard of the fear of failure. And

those who see the role of local government only as that of providing basic services need to answer the question, if not local governments, then who? Are they content to trust that someday

Congress wakes up and starts solving the big problems before it's too late? If so, how long can we all afford to wait before problems like climate change and affordable housing become too big to solve? Clearly, there are no easy answers, but there is a fundamental need for the city of Portland to have this debate and determine what the role of local government ought to be.

The larger societal issues such as climate change, wealth inequality and infrastructure investment (just to name a few) can't wait. They need to be solved now. The overarching question of the 2016 race for City Hall ought to be what Portland's role is in solving these problems of the day. For if our elected officials believe that Portland has a role to play, then it is imperative that we as a city have a thorough and robust debate about the city's role. And may that thorough and robust debate create a mandate for candidates to act on the change, the promise, and help them solve the large issues of the day that the federal government seems either unwilling or incapable of solving on its own.

The time of year is familiar, with warmer weather, blossoms and budgets, but the conversation has never been more serious. Portlanders need to decide what kind of a local government they want — one that focuses solely on basic services, or one that acknowledges that although we may not be able to solve all of the national problems, we have an obligation to at least try; because if we don't, who will?



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