

Bold actions needed on housing emergency

Street Roots was glad to hear that Mayor Charlie Hales declared a state of emergency on housing and homelessness in our community this week. The question now becomes: Does the mayor and other elected officials have the capacity and political will to seize the moment?

The declaration is a valuable and important statement. It provides an opportunity to shed formerly tried and true policies — and in fact is tantamount to a statement that those tried and true methods aren't enough any longer. It means the gloves come off, and the shirt sleeves get rolled up. But it is only the first step in what has to be many bold actions to change the status quo.

The need for housing and support for people

experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty has been well documented by Street Roots. The reality is, there's been an emergency happening in our community for 30 years. Unfortunately, elected leaders have chosen to manage the crisis instead of actually tackling the problem.

Mayor Hales is proposing to expedite emergency housing options by waiving cumbersome zoning codes and converting city-owned buildings into shelters. The declaration also restates the ongoing objective of the city and Multnomah County to house all homeless veterans by the end of the year.

The mayor also pledges to provide supportive housing for people with mental illnesses after they are discharged from the planned Unity Center. The Unity Center is a joint project of the city, the state, Multnomah and Washington counties and area hospitals to consolidate immediate mental health care. The center is expected to open late next year.

But this is an emergency.

Scaling up investments in housing, standing up to powerful interest groups that have squashed revenue options in the past and having the political will to make a heavy lift on these issues simply hasn't been a top priority. Times are changing.

We believe residents have significant concerns and clearly understand that Portland and Multnomah County are experiencing a housing crisis.

Being able to respond to the current housing crisis will take a menu of options, including new regulations, incentives for building affordable housing and a large ongoing investment in permanent housing.

It's not new news that there are thousands of people experiencing homelessness and thousands more threatened with the prospect of homelessness and displacement from Portland and Multnomah County.

The Welcome Home Coalition estimates that it would take an additional \$50 million annually to actually begin to tackle the problem. Research shows that we currently have a 23,000 affordable housing shortage in Multnomah County and 40,000 units region-wide. We're not keeping up.

In order to legitimately respond to a state of emergency for housing and homelessness in our

community — Street Roots recommends the following actions:

- A sustained, annual \$20 million investment by the city and county to support services and build new housing, in addition to fortified budget investments
- A significant increase in funding at a local and statewide level for mental health services and housing
- A demolition tax to support housing and neighborhood preservation
- A fee on short-term rentals such as Airbnb to support rent assistance and eviction prevention
- An aggressive land banking strategy to support future affordable housing developments
- Increasing the Urban Renewal Set Aside for affordable housing from 30 percent to 50 percent
- Lift statewide preemptions and implementing, along with state government, rent control, inclusionary zoning and access to other

revenue tools currently banned at the state level to support housing

- Require developer impact fees with every new development of market rate housing

- Suspend no-cause evictions for one-year

- Increase the notice period of rent increases over 5 percent from the current 30 days to one year

- Encourage private investors and regional foundations to play more of a role in ending homelessness in Portland

- Waive zoning codes and support more shelter beds for women and tent cities

- Reallocate resources for the criminal justice system directly into housing

- Challenge Metro to convene a regional taskforce of mayors to tackle the problem and encourage

housing investments in neighboring cities and towns

- Challenge Metro to invest in affordable housing around the region

- Demand our elected officials make a personal investment to create smart housing policies at a statewide and federal level, rather than simply relying on housing coalitions and government lobbyists to get the job done

The announcement of a state of emergency from Mayor Hales comes on the heels of Los Angeles, who earlier in the week, also declared a state of emergency on homelessness and housing. In the case of Los Angeles, they also announced a \$100 million allocation to be invested in homeless services and housing. That's a significant amount more than what Portland is proposing.

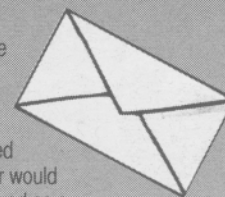
The reality is, if we're going to call the housing crisis a state of emergency — and that's exactly what it is — than Portland's has to implement an expansive plan that does more simply give lip service to the problem.

There's no question that all of the recommendations Street Roots outlines above are a heavy lift. It's also true the problem isn't going to get any better unless we act boldly. After all, we are talking about an emergency.

It's going to take real leadership to get the job done and Street Roots is challenging area leaders to do just that. Lead. The people will follow.

Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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EDITORIAL