

PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Good policy, not politics, expected from city's declaration

Someone asked me this week: Is the homeless and housing crisis really something that should be declared a state of emergency, or was it just politics?

I don't know. You tell me. Is having thousands of people sleeping on our streets in unhealthy living conditions and having scores of people receiving no-cause evictions in Portland constitute an emergency?

I think so.

Frankly, I don't really care how elected leaders arrived at the conclusion that we need to create a state of emergency currently. People change. Our city is changing. There will be politics. There will be theater. If elected leaders responding to the

outrage of community voices and evidence that housing is one of our city's top issues is playing politics, so be it.

I personally think it's our job as advocates to question our elected representatives when the time is right. Saying that, it's also important to give kudos when the people in office get it right – regardless of motives. In the case of the city of Portland declaring a state of emergency for people experiencing homelessness and poverty in Portland – elected officials got it right. Thank you.

The declaration of a state of emergency this week was more symbolic than anything. Don't let that spoil this historic moment. By creating a state of emergency the city now has the power to make important zoning decisions on a range of options, from shelters to tent cities.

Housing Commissioner Dan Saltzman said, "There are at least 12 concrete proposals going to be coming out in the next year to support people on the streets and affordable housing."

Those proposals include taxes on short-term rentals and demolitions, along with developer impact fees to create the city's first housing trust fund. That's a big deal. Also included will be a push to increase the money allocated in urban renewal areas to support affordable

housing and a bump in the budget, to name a few.

Lastly, we hope the city will work to create the robust eviction protections available, including giving tenants more time to respond to no-cause evictions and rent increases.

The reality is that we've been functioning in a state of emergency since the 1980s – when the federal government began to dis-invest billions of dollars in public housing subsidies. Each year, dozens of people die homeless in Portland. Bad things happen to good people, and good people are forced to do bad things to survive on the streets, culminating in thousands of personal emergencies every day. It's not OK.

Having worked on the streets for more than 15 years, I've experienced some very traumatic things. I'm sad to say there are more people that I've known that have died an unpleasant death on the streets that I can count or remember. Homelessness is hell. There's really no other way to describe it.

At the same time, we know we can be successful given the right resources and tools. No, that's not a campaign promise or slogan. It's a reality. Allocating more resources to support people suffering is not only the right thing to do, in the long run, it will save our system and community time and money.

Studies have shown time and again – considering costs in public safety, health care and service expenses – that housing people is much cheaper than paying to address the issue of homelessness. A hospital or jail bed isn't a solution to Portlanders suffering on the streets.

In the next year the residents of Portland and Multnomah County are going to see a variety of tools created to regulate and create revenue for people experiencing poverty in our community.

Of course, the devil is in the details, but I believe we are on the right path. Really, it's up to all of us. Government, the private sector and our community can collectively move the dial on this issue if we don't let our foot off the gas and there's no better time than the present.



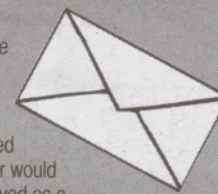
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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