

Jessica Vega Pederson

Running unopposed, the veteran state lawmaker is getting ready for her new role on the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners

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If you're a voter living in East Portland, chances are your choice for Multnomah County Commissioner will be an easy one. State Representative Jessica Vega Pederson is running unopposed for the county commissioner seat representing District 3, an area that extends roughly from Cesar Chavez Boulevard to Southeast 148th, bordered by I-84 to the north and Clackamas County to the south. The first Latina ever elected to the House, Vega Pederson has spent the past four years representing District 47 in Salem, serving on the Joint Committee on Department of Energy Oversight, the House Committee on Judiciary, and as the Chair of the House Committee on Energy and the Environment. She will be replacing Judy Shiprack, who has served as County Commissioner for District 3 since 2008.

Street Roots spoke with State Rep. Vega Pederson about her vision for East Portland and her goals as county commissioner.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: *What areas of government are you most interested in working with as county commissioner?*

Jessica Vega Pederson: The air toxins issue is something that I'm very concerned about. As that continues to unfold and as we're looking at it from a public health perspective, I think the county can play a big role in that. But ultimately, East Portland has the highest rent increases happening right now in this city, so the affordability of housing and the homelessness issue are some of the things that are going to be absolutely critical that we're going to need to work on. And those are two issues that the county is not going to be able to fix by itself. No one agency or government or organization will be.

A-D.G.: *How will you get other municipalities to better address housing and homelessness?*

J.V.P.: I have good relationships with people who work at the city level, with the

commissioners, with my colleagues at the state, and also with the other commissioners and Metro, too, for that matter. So I think it's using the relationships to have very honest conversations and productive conversations about what needs to be done.

A-D.G.: *What will you do to make sure there's affordable housing countywide?*

J.V.P.: I think we have to do a couple of different things. I was really proud to be able to support the removal of the ban on inclusionary zoning. It's going to help us as we're building to make sure that we're including affordable housing in the mix. It actually didn't go as far I would like to see. There are certain limitations on it that we'll need to work on in the future, but I think it was a good first step. It's also making sure that, as people are building affordable housing, we are doing it throughout the city so that people have access to where they're working, where the best transit is, access to services like parks and all of those things. Finally, this is relatively a new area for the county to get involved in, the affordable housing piece. And so I'd like to, as a commissioner, help follow along with the direction that we've started going and look at the policies that we can put in place, incentives that we can do at a county level, to help develop more affordable housing.

A-D.G.: *What's one promise you can make and deliver on to the many communities of color in your district?*

J.V.P.: One that I can make is to take a very serious look at the racial and ethnic diversity within the Multnomah County government itself – our employees, the programs that we have, who we're

contracting with, all of that – to take a measurement of where we are, and then help put programs in place that help everybody, but specifically the people of color who are working in the government, do personal and professional development to get the skills they need to achieve the next step in the ladder for their careers. Also, it's very important to me to have a diverse staff. So that's a commitment I can make as well.

A-D.G.: *How will you address the racial disparity issues in Multnomah County jails?*

J.V.P.: We need to take a very serious look at what's happening in our jails. It's, again, making sure that we're hiring people who realize the impact of their behavior and have the training they need in order to recognize what's happening. The training is the big piece of it, but I think this is also something that has to come from the top down. We need to make sure that they know it's a priority of the commission, it's a priority of their leadership, that this is unacceptable and it has to change and then give them the tools they need to be able to change and to have the knowledge and the skills they need to do their job in a more equitable way.

A-D.G.: *Do you think Multnomah County Sheriff should be an appointed or an elected position?*

J.V.P.: I have a little concern that we would be the only county of our size that would have an appointed position, but it was an appointed position in the past and it seemed to work well, so I'm interested to see how the discussion with the charter committee goes and then go from there.

A-D.G.: *As you work to improve all kinds of*

infrastructure in your district, how will you ensure that improved infrastructure doesn't involuntarily displace low-income residents?

J.V.P.: I think it's looking at how do you create permanently affordable housing in communities so that even as neighborhoods change there remains the ability for people to stay in place, to live in place, because we've made that investment in permanent affordability. I also think that a lot of it has to do with workforce development and giving people the opportunity to participate, as the community changes, in what's happening in their community economically.

A-D.G.: *Do you support safe injection sites?*

J.V.P.: I think it's an interesting idea and I'd like to learn more about it, but I have questions about how it would work and what exactly that would mean.

A-D.G.: *What's one project that you're excited about?*

J.V.P.: I'm really excited about the Unity Center, the coalition with OHSU and the city and the county and so many other organizations that are looking at having a central location for mental health services. I think that's going to be a great model and we need to do more investment in mental health, as well. This is a really big issue and again there's a lot of really good work being done to address and put more resources to the issue, so we need to continue that. I also think, and this couples with what's happening right now with the houseless population, having services that go out to where people are to help make that first step of getting help is something that we'll need to work on, too.



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