

**COMMISSION, from page 4**

designed for the people, for the masses," he says. "It was designed for the elite, for the special interests, if you will. We need a system that represents the people – all of the people, not just a certain number of people."

One doesn't have to look too hard to see that Portland's system of city government contradicts one of the core tenets of democracy, says McCoy, who runs a company called Marathon Courier.

"It's really taxation without representation," he says. "It has never made sense. The façade is that Portland is this bastion of liberalism; that it's very progressive. But in reality, Portland has always been solidly conservative in its politics. It had a very white population to begin with, and it has become more and more white."

**Reform drive**

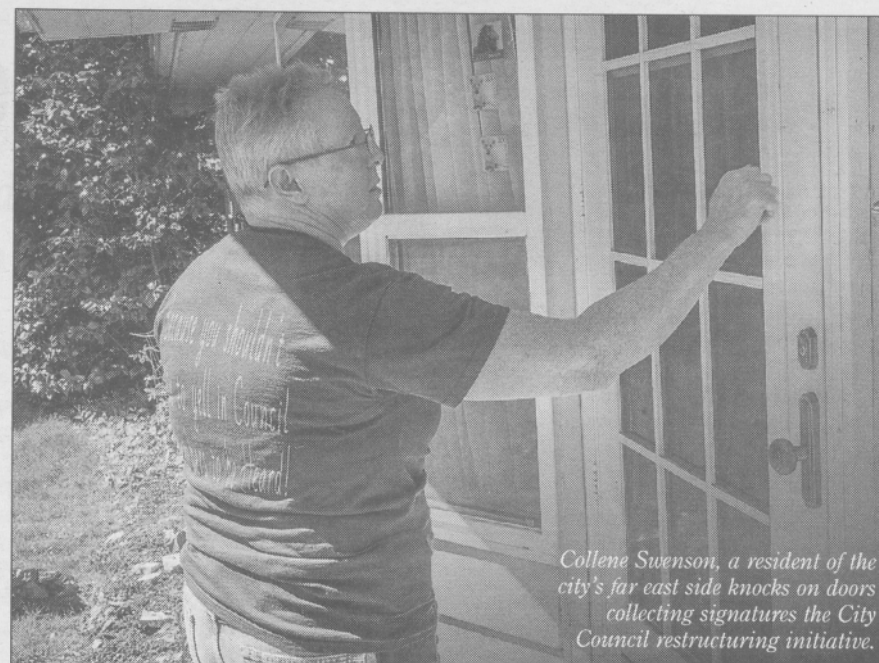
It is that desire to elect regional representatives – not so much the strong mayor feature – that is driving the latest reform movement in Portland.

A group of east-side activists is gathering signatures for a ballot measure it calls the Portland Community Equality Act, which would change the commission system to a nine-member City Council, with seven members representing geographic districts in which they must live, and two members elected at large. The group has until July 8 to collect 31,345 signatures from city voters in order to get it on the November ballot.

"I don't need a government if they're not going to represent me," said Collene Swenson, a resident of the city's far east side who is leading the PCEA charge. Swenson, who works as an insurance adjuster, and a group of her neighbors are optimistic that a reform vote could succeed this year for several reasons, the strongest of which is the large number of people in all parts of the city who are feeling the economic pinch of rapid growth.

"It is absolutely a power grab for the voters," Swenson said. "It's a power grab for you and for me to have direct representation."

The possibility that voters who once played into the "tyranny" cited by Abrams are now feeling the negative effects of the commission form of government might



*Collene Swenson, a resident of the city's far east side knocks on doors collecting signatures the City Council restructuring initiative.*

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

result in the strongest challenge yet.

That irony is not lost on Richard Florida, an urban development expert who teaches at the University of Toronto. Toronto is the only other major city in North America to employ the weak-mayor form of government.

"The real issue is not gentrification displacing the poor," said Florida, author of numerous academic papers and books on the subject, including "The Rise of the Creative Class." "The bigger issue is that housing prices rise more generally in a metro, making it harder for just about everyone, except for the relatively privileged, to make ends meet."

"We find that while the creative class and knowledge workers benefit from locating in cities like Portland or San Francisco or New York, it is the working people and the service people that tend to be hit hard."

For Bo Neill, who has run an auto repair shop in Southeast Portland for more than 30 years, the reality of change plays out every day on the streets around him.

"There's not one available lot around here that isn't being dug up or developed," he said over the clatter of tools at TVG Volvo Specialists, bemoaning an uncertain future for him and three other small-business owners on his block.

"We need density, which I would prefer to sprawl, but we're being forced out by

gentrification, and no, I don't feel like there's somebody in City Hall that I can call. It feels like a very westside-centric government. It kind of makes me feel like a weak sister. I think a representative system would be a good way for us to have a say in what's going on."

**The face of change**

If the ballot measure were to pass, what would change look like, and would it address the needs of the African-American community?

The experience of Austin, Texas, a city to which Portland is often compared for its progressive attitudes, may provide a cautionary tale.

In 2012, Austin voters approved a change from a system under which all six City Council members were elected at large to a 10-member district representation system with the mayor elected by a citywide vote.

Ten was the minimum number needed at the time to draw a district in which black voters would have an opportunity to elect an African-American council member, according to a recent analysis of the Austin vote by Eric Tang, a professor of African and African diaspora studies at the University of Texas.

Austin, like Portland, has seen a decline

in the percentage of African-American residents even as the cities have grown.

That decline may leave that city's voters with another tough choice, the Austin American-Statesman's Jody Seaborn wrote in a May op-ed.

"It's also conceivable Austin's African-American population will have shrunk so much the city will have to consider a different question," Seaborn wrote. "At what low percentage point does a group's numbers no longer justify gerrymandering a district to give them an opportunity to elect their own council representative?"

Opposition to previous reform efforts has focused on the negatives of the strong mayor system. Arguments by church and labor groups against changing to a district system were summarized by the Rev. Chuck Currie of Northeast Portland in a letter to *The Oregonian*.

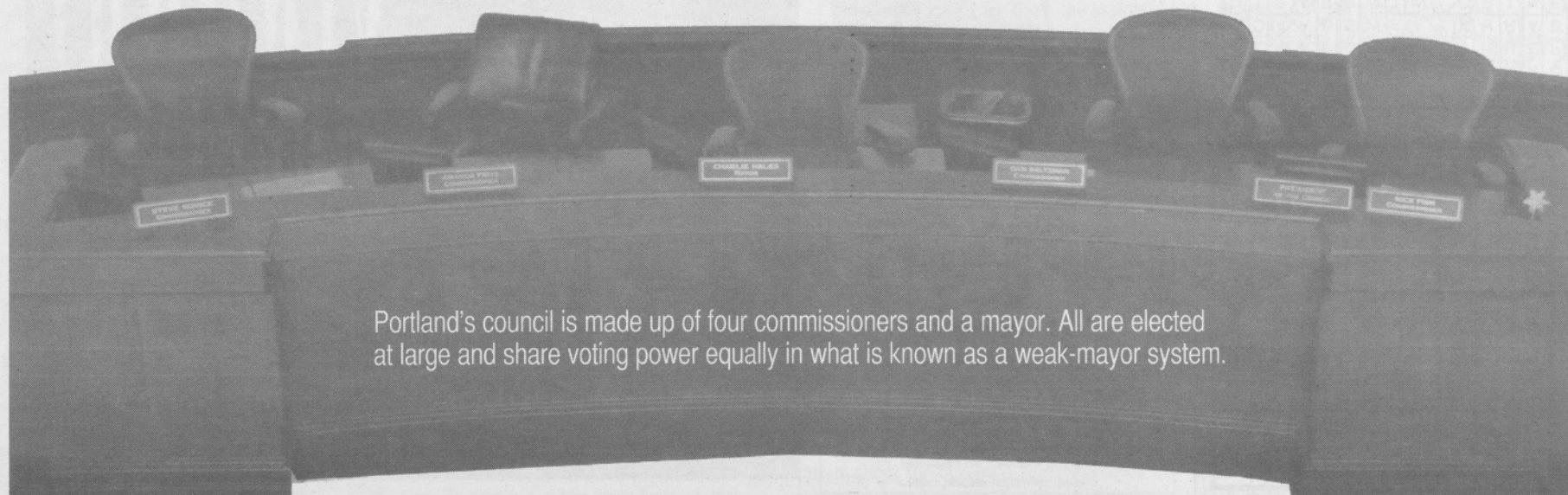
"Replacing our commission form of government with a ward or district system would disempower voters and, instead of forcing elected officials to create citywide coalitions, would be filled with individuals with more narrow agendas," Currie said in the November letter. "This would not benefit the common good of Portland and, at the same time, would funnel all real power into a mayor dependent on corporate donations to govern – while dismantling the checks and balances in our city that keep such a good lid on corruption."

The way Harris sees it, district representation is an essential next step for Portland.

"It strengthens citizen involvement," said Harris, who lives in the Rose City Park neighborhood in Northeast Portland. "It gives communities more voice in decisions. Yes, all communities and all neighborhoods have commonalities, yet each has unique issues that need to be addressed specifically for that district."

Direct representation in government would improve quality of life and create a sense of well-being for everyone, Harris said.

"Having the ability to elect a person within the community," she said, "one the citizens know can and who will carry their voices to city government with intellect and high standards of ethics, give citizens a feeling of equity and inclusion."



Portland's council is made up of four commissioners and a mayor. All are elected at large and share voting power equally in what is known as a weak-mayor system.