

MERKLEY, from page 4

the hottest month on record ever. It is the 14th month in a row that is the hottest month on record. We have to treat this as a threat to the life on our planet.

A.W.: (Addressing climate change, Merkley plans to introduce legislation that would require 100 percent of U.S. energy to come from renewable sources by 2050.) You described that in a "Think Out Loud" interview as "a very fast pivot" and a "very high bar to reach." What will get us there?

J.M.: It's going to take working on every level: for families to think about this, for cities and counties to pursue reductions in carbon dioxide – Oregon has been the first state to ban coal electrons – and for the federal government to work with and lead the rest of the nations together. We've seen some real changes. Paris was a very productive meeting. India, a major contributor to (carbon dioxide emissions) and global warming gases, now has a prime minister taking global warming much more seriously. We've got to work in partnership with nations across the planet. No nation can do this alone. And we've got to think of every way to attack it – insulate homes more, design our cars so they drive farther, promote electric cars.

A.W.: All the things you're mentioning are things we already know. Don't you think there needs to be more political will to attack it? What will that take?

J.M.: This really highlights the problem that we have with our republic having been corrupted through the Citizens United Supreme Court decision. The fossil fuel industry and the Koch brothers are putting hundreds of millions of dollars into the political system to essentially buy the Legislature. It stands the vision of our republic on its head. The vision of the republic is "we the republic," in contrast to government by and for the powerful. But with Citizens United, "we the republic" becomes "we the privileged and powerful."

A.W.: Portland, much of Oregon and the West Coast is experiencing a crisis-level shortage of affordable housing and a historically low vacancy rate that is affecting the lowest incomes, even the middle class. What are lawmakers in Washington, D.C., doing to alleviate the problem?

J.M.: The Portland-metro area and Eugene are the most stressed housing portfolios in the country. The vacancy rate is estimated to be less than 1 percent. That means there's nothing available to rent. Section 8 certificates ... are out of date. One of the things we have to do in areas where the rents are changing quickly is have the basis for Section 8 be able to be monitored and adjusted more quickly, so the certificates can actually be used. Right now, if you're so fortunate to get to the top of the list and get a Section 8 certificate, you can't find an apartment. A very high percentage of the folks who actually get one can't find a property they can rent. It's a major tool that is ineffective right now. We have to restore the effectiveness of it.



Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) speaks to a crowd of postal workers on Veterans Day 2014 at Tom McCall Waterfront Park.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

"The fossil fuel industry and the Koch brothers are putting hundreds of millions of dollars in the political system to essentially buy the Legislature. (The Citizens United Supreme Court decision) stands the vision of our republic on its head. The vision of the republic is 'we the republic,' in contrast to government by and for the powerful. But with Citizens United, 'we the republic' becomes 'we the privileged and powerful.'"

U.S. SEN. JEFF MERKLEY
(D-ORE.)

A.W.: So you're suggesting simply pumping more funding into the Section 8 program to allow for it to pay for higher rents?

J.M.: To adjust the market rate rent in which the certificates are useable, so that there are apartments that are available to people. That is one piece of the puzzle. And we have to construct a lot more affordable housing. There was an estimate that I saw that showed that of the last 20,000 units we have built in the Portland metro area, less than 5 percent are affordable for less than 80 percent of median family income. In other words, everything that is being built is for higher-income individuals. We have to find a way to incentivize the construction of units that are affordable to people who live below median income, which, of course, is half the population.

A.W.: What do you think those incentives are?

J.M.: One of them is to strengthen the tax credit program, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. What I really

like about this program is that the bulk of the units are produced by nonprofits that have a lot of pride in what the units look like; they take good care of them over time. It becomes a decent place to live at an affordable price. Strengthening that program, improving the Section 8 program, recognizing that we need to do the same in rural areas. Those are all things we should be undertaking.

A.W.: There has been a lot of talk this election cycle about incremental change versus revolution and how much change should be happening in the country right now. Those two things come in waves in our country – there was the antebellum period before the Civil War, then the Civil War, which drastically changed our country. Then there was the 1950s, followed by the massive social changes of the Civil Rights era. Do you think we're on the cusp of another major shift in culture?

J.M.: So, here's the challenge. In the first three decades after World War II, we had an economy in which citizens really participated in the wealth that they were

creating, ... (lifting) up the middle class. But for the last four decades, from 1975 until now, virtually 100 percent of the new income has gone to the wealthiest 10 percent. That leaves nine of 10 Americans in the cold. This is part of the reason we have a housing crisis; we don't have the jobs and incomes to support the ability of the middle class to buy or rent homes.

It has bred enormous frustration. And frustration is what drives major changes. I think it's why we see Bernie's message about college resonating. So many jobs now require college education. We need to treat it as high school – a public good, an investment in the next generation of students, not a privilege for the few and the wealthy. It's why his message about building infrastructure – that we should put people to work building infrastructure – it's why his message about fixing the corruption of our political system resonates. People can see something fundamentally wrong when you have decisions that serve the very best off. The very best off don't need more help, to put it simply. As my father used to say, there are two golden rules. One of them, of course, is do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The second is that those who have the gold, rule. Right now, we're controlled by the second golden rule. It's not in sync with the vision of our country. We need to change that. This frustration has the possibility to provide some major changes in how we approach politics and the country.