

A new perspective in Salem

Tawna Sanchez, the first Native American to represent Portland in the state Legislature, brings an eye on affordable housing, the Superfund clean-up and our problematic foster care system

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Portland has often been described as a “white city.” Just this summer, a lengthy article in The Atlantic actually branded Portland “the Whitest City in America” and detailed the ugly history of anti-black discrimination from 1859 to the present.

Usually missing from these summaries is the fact that Portland also has the ninth-largest urban Native American population in the country, a large array of tribal organizations, and a unique relationship between the city and neighboring tribal governments. In order to be constructed as “white utopias,” cities like Portland historically worked not only to exclude African-Americans, but to disenfranchise Native Americans and criminalize their cultures.

Since that time, Native peoples have won the right to self-government, the right to U.S. citizenship, the right to vote, the right to sue in court, and the right to co-manage their food sources. Today their sovereignty over traditional territory continues to grow, and their representation in politics finally seems to be improving.

This year, Portland will send Native American Tawna Sanchez to represent them in Salem. After narrowly winning the most contested district earlier this year, Sanchez will head to the state Capitol in November, representing District 43 in North Portland. She is the second Native American ever to be elected to the Legislature in Oregon, and the first to represent Portland.

Sanchez is known for her work with the Native American Youth and Family Center – a social service organization founded by volunteers in 1974, which began by teaching literacy with the Mohawk

newspaper Akwesasne Notes. Sanchez began at NAYA as a youth, and when it turned into a nonprofit in 1994, she became its second employee. She later founded its “Healing Circles” program, a nationally recognized program for preventing and disrupting domestic violence. Today she is both director of family services and interim executive director at NAYA, which employs 120 people on an annual budget of \$10 million, serving both Native and non-Native families with health education, housing assistance and job training.

Street Roots reached out to Sanchez to discuss some of her priority issues in North Portland.

Stephen Quirke: *You’re the first Native American to represent Portland at the state level, and the second ever to be elected to the state Legislature. How does it feel to achieve that milestone?*

Tawna Sanchez: I don’t necessarily think about it as a personal achievement, but I think it’s a very important milestone for all Native folks. We always feel so disenfranchised with this whole system, and a lot of folks of course have a clear recognition that the system was designed after Native peoples’ way of representing our own communities, and yet we have no engagement with it whatsoever. So I think overall it may be a very important thing for everyone to just maybe celebrate that, and just have that recognition that this is a first.

S.Q.: *What are the major challenges in your district?*

T.S.: Because it’s a “prime district,” people are trying to flip these old houses here. And people are very concerned about the fact that if you’re an older person you may not be able to stay in your home long term. We also have apartment complexes going up like crazy in different spots. It’s amazing. And while we were barely able to sneak in some of that inclusionary zoning, it’s so sad to have to call it “inclusionary.”

S.Q.: *Right. We’ve included poor people.*

T.S.: We’ve included them – zoned for them! As if they’re this bizarre species. We’ve zoned for them. I have such a struggle with that terminology because it just feels so disrespectful. Anyway, despite some level of that, it doesn’t make it any easier that there are not places that people can afford to live anymore. It’s a constant conversation that I have with people in this district.

S.Q.: *What can be done about that at the state level?*

T.S.: I’m not positive at this point in time, as I learn more about this position and what we have the capacity to do. I think what really might be the best option at this point in time is to save what we have. There

may not be options for doing a whole heck of a lot else, sadly enough.

It’s a much larger investment to actually build housing that people can afford to live in. I would love to be able to try to do that. You have investors or people who say, “It doesn’t pencil out.” That’s the word I keep hearing from people who want to build that housing, who do that work. Like inclusionary zoning: If you do too much of it, it just doesn’t pencil out for them. It doesn’t make them any money.

In 2014, a Trader Joe’s was being planned on an empty lot on MLK Jr. Boulevard, and the Portland African American Leadership Forum condemned the project and got it scrapped. What can be done to give communities more control over these kinds of proposals, to control the investment that comes in?

Trader Joe’s may not have been the best option, but we are still in somewhat of a food desert in that lower end. I don’t see why we wouldn’t do more to ease that food desert situation for a lot of people, like if there were a real store there, where half



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wasn’t just selling wine for Trader Joe’s. Something has to happen. Obviously people were engaged enough to make it not happen, so what would be the next choice? And do we want another massive apartment complex on MLK right now?

S.Q.: *Right. A lot of people are very upset with how that neighborhood changed, even just in the past few years.*

T.S.: It’s insane. I drive down Williams and Vancouver these days and am really disappointed, not just with them taking a lane away, but that it is almost a canyon with all of those big apartment complexes, none of which is very cheap to rent, even the studios. It’s very, very expensive. I was thinking I should take a cruise down there, and just try to apply for a couple of them just for shits and giggles. See if I can afford to live there.

S.Q.: *Many people are now talking rent control. What are your thoughts on that?*

T.S.: I lived in Berkeley years ago, and I just remember it being the norm. My sister rented part of a duplex there for many years, and that was a really amazing thing for her to live in an affordable place.

Folks nowadays are saying, “Well, that’s only gonna help a few people.” Why do they think it would only help a few people? What’s going on with that? I just haven’t done enough research on it to see how it might be implemented. I’d love to try to figure it out, but I would be very, very concerned about unintended consequences.

Our law now says landlords are required to give you 90-day notice of a rent increase, but prior to the law going into effect, landlords increased their rents immensely, which caused a lot of people to become homeless, or moved out to other places where they could afford to live. That was insane. So I worry about how we could implement something like that without that opportunity for landlords to create that kind of a situation again.

S.Q.: *I’ve been told there are communities all over the Northwest without any homeless people – on Native reservations, where people simply take each other in as a social norm. So in a way, don’t we have an odd concept here in just accepting homeless people, and not making a sacrifice to take care of them?*

T.S.: It’s very true. People generally don’t live “out” on the rez. They live someplace, with somebody. They double-up, or something. There’s always a trailer out in the backyard somewhere. Some place you can sleep.

S.Q.: *You’ve worked in foster care for a very long time. What are some of the challenges of providing*

foster care in Oregon?

T.S.: I’ve got meetings coming up to see what I can do from a legislative perspective. What I’m really concerned about is, No.1: Why do kids go into care in the first place? Why is there a disproportionate number of kids of color in the foster care system? And why can’t we do something about the fact that we don’t have enough foster homes, and that we have kiddos staying in hotel rooms with case managers?

And we can do something about that, because there are community members who would take these kids in a heartbeat. It’s our system that’s stopping them. It’s just what you were talking about in terms of that homeless aspect. People take other people in on the rez, and in smaller communities, because they are doing the right thing. We could do this every day with kids. As long as we can secure their safety, which unfortunately the DHS system has not been able to do in its entirety. But as long as we can secure their safety, then why wouldn’t we allow that? So let’s figure it out, and see what we can do differently to make that happen.

S.Q.: *What are the challenges of implementing the Indian Child Welfare Act in Oregon?*

T.S.: I’m very concerned with kids who have been in the foster care system for a long time who keep being moved from foster home to foster home to group home to foster home to different situations over and over again. And it is not the easiest thing in the world to do by any stretch of the imagination for a foster parent. It’s not. But if we don’t train these people to know when a kid is responding to trauma versus just being a little pain in the butt, then we’re not doing them any service either. And your own kid is often a pain in the butt, and you don’t kick him out for it.

S.Q.: *I know you’ve spent decades doing family-based work on restorative justice, healing circles and domestic violence. How does that work inform how you look at state policies that affect families?*

T.S.: I think they have given me amazing opportunities to understand how things work on the ground, but also to be able to articulate better how that works. I think oftentimes lawmakers are not clear about what the ramifications are all the way down to the actual person who is affected by the law.

That experience that I have, I think, will be very valuable, because it will help me better articulate the needs of communities and people on the ground who experience the very issues that we’re talking about on a regular basis in the Legislature.

S.Q.: *Paul Lumley will soon be the new executive director at NAYA. How do you think he will do?*

T.S.: I really am looking forward to it. I think it’s going to be amazing. It’s certainly a different realm for him. But I’ve lived through four directors. Each one has brought something different, and I think he’ll do the same.

S.Q.: *The city of Portland recently hired its first official tribal liaison. What are some of the issues they can resolve?*

T.S.: One thing I was very concerned about were issues with the (Portland Harbor) Superfund. These are going to be very important to the tribes, and having somebody who can better articulate what’s going on with that, in some instances having to articulate the city’s perspective, and give the push-back from the tribal perspective. I’m hoping that person has, or will have, a greater understanding of what that means long term, and from a Native perspective, like what does that mean to have a clean river again? And what if we don’t? It’s a big deal.

S.Q.: *I noticed that your district actually extends into the river, and includes part of the Superfund site.*

T.S.: It does. I met with some folks from the Port earlier this week, and toured the area down there. And they know I don’t always agree with them, on what they want to do. I was glad that the, what was it called, the little acronym about where they wanted to stuff the – “Confined Waste Disposal Area” ...

S.Q.: *The “inclusionary waste zone”?*

T.S.: Exactly! I was very happy about that. They showed me where the suggestion was, and said, “Yeah, we’re not doing it.”

They showed me the areas where the different slips were where they had already started some clean-up, and ones where they were concerned about. That was very well-trafficked all the time, and had a very significant amount of debris under there they would have to disturb. That was a big concern for them.

I made it very clear that, while I understand that it’s a lot of money, and it’s a lot of work, and it’s a lot of time out of what you have to do: Why not now, versus leaving it for the next generation to have to deal with, or the next generation after that? That’s the hard part right there.

The reality of it is, they wanted to show me because they need to make sure that people understand from their perspective, which I do, I get it. But I see money as a thing where, if you have it, and somebody needs it, why am I going to hold onto it? Why keep somebody who needs something from having it? I do not understand the concept of hoarding money. And that comes from an indigenous perspective, of course – or that people feel like they have to have more money than someone else. So, if you could be responsible for cleaning up some of the biggest mess that somebody else left behind, and that means you don’t make as much money as other people, or you don’t have as many marbles when you die, why not? Why wouldn’t you do it? Why wouldn’t you take care of something that was a problem?

Let’s not just be altruistic when it comes to giving money to the food bank. Give food to the next 10 generations. How about that? Allow them to fish in the river.