

Mayor Hales and a legacy to build upon

We are only weeks away from Donald Trump taking over as the new leader of the free world. People are both scared and angry. We see the dark clouds gathering on the horizon. We know a storm is coming. Still, we must remain steadfast in the work we all collectively do for the common good. We must continue marching toward the light.

Locally, mayor-elect Ted Wheeler will take over Portland in both prosperous and turbulent times. The tale of two cities has never been

more apparent. For some, Portland is the "Garden of Eden, a paradise for those to live and see," to quote the late Woody Guthrie. For others, it's hard times in the city.

The new mayor, his team and commissioners have their work cut out for them. Working to navigate new federal realities, a looming state deficit and a growing housing crisis will not be easy. It will take great leadership to weather the storm.

That brings me to outgoing Mayor Charlie Hales, a man that has faced many critics, myself included. There are many things that I would have done differently, but hindsight is 20/20. It's easy to be a critic hiding behind a pen. It's much harder to be a leader in times of great uncertainty.

I have taken flack from both the left and the establishment over my criticism or praise of the Hales administration. This column will probably be no different.

I can think of no other mayor in my tenure that has done more for the homeless than Hales. You might say, what are you talking about, Israel? The same mayor that ordered sweeps of the Springwater Corridor or has at times battled the business community of homeless policies? Fair enough.

Here's the thing. What happens when even the smartest minds in our city aren't exactly clear on how to climb out of years of failed policies on homelessness? We know that after 40 years of federal disinvestment in homeless and housing services that our local community will never be able to scale up to actually solve the problem. It's too big.

So, what does a mayor do when they inherit a city that doesn't

have adequate ongoing revenue to support housing and homelessness?

You throw the playbook out and create a homeless emergency is what you do. You work to immediately create policies that should have been in place 20 years ago. You work to help create the city's first affordable housing ballot measure. You create local taxes, like a short-term rental tax to secure ongoing revenue. You throw out two decades of failed criminalization efforts against the homeless and turn the city on its head. You stand up to powerful interests in order to deliver something bigger than the next election. You buck the trends. And that's exactly what Hales has done in his time in office.

It's easy for the homeless emergency to get lost in the many things that plague our community and world. The reality on the streets is that the actions of the current mayor helped save lives – period. It created a political climate coupled with market realities that made it

possible to call all hands on deck to respond to our housing crisis. Would it solve the problem? Absolutely not, but doing nothing wasn't an option. Without the housing emergency I have no doubt that even more people would be sleeping on our streets this winter.

The thing about being a leader is that you have to do your best given the experience you have and the realities laid out before you. Everyone will critique you. Everyone could have done it better or differently. It's a slog at times. When it's good, it's good, and when it's bad, it's not so good. Hales experienced both in trying to respond to the housing crisis. Could he have gone further with housing policies? Possibly. But he stood up to some of the most powerful players in the city to give people the opportunity to have a good night's sleep and the possibility of a safe place to call home.

It's easy to simply look at what's in front of you and judge a book by its cover. In the case of Mayor Hales, from day one, he stood up against the idea of criminalizing people on the streets through sidewalk ordinances, panhandling laws and aggressive enforcement of camping policies.

Let's hope that all of Portland's future mayors have the same kind of courage. That at the end of their tenure, we can proudly say we worked our hardest to find solutions in an impossible situation and tried to be a friend of the poor. It's more courage than most.

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DIRECTOR'S DESK

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