



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Talking housing and the streets with Ted Wheeler

I had the opportunity to sit down with Mayor Ted Wheeler last week in the midst of the snowstorm to talk about housing and homelessness. Here is our conversation.

right in front of our very eyes. That is unacceptable. I don't need to lecture you on it. You live it.

I.B.: So you decided to keep the Portland Housing Bureau in your portfolio; it's the first time, I think, in my tenure – I've been in Portland on and off for 16 years – that I can remember a mayor ever taking that under their wing. I guess what's your reasoning and what's your vision for the bureau?

T.W.: The reasoning is that when I ran for mayor, housing affordability was the single No. 1 issue that this community was concerned about. People are experiencing high levels of anxiety about being priced out of our community. The Housing Bureau isn't the only bureau that addresses the problem of affordability, but it's the key bureau. The Housing Bureau is at the nexus for all the other bureaus that have a role to play in housing affordability – whether it's the Bureau of Development Services or the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability or some of the other bureaus involved in permitting, like fire. The Housing Bureau is the bureau that sets the agenda. I felt as mayor it was incumbent upon me to be the leader of that bureau. There really was no debate about it. People understood that if I was elected mayor, I was going to take the Housing Bureau. That was the reason, now the vision. It's twofold.

No. 1, I want to enhance and protect the rights of people who are tenants, and this is more specific to renters. I want to make sure that fewer people find themselves forced out of their housing situation and find themselves on the street by protecting their rights first and foremost and implementing a just-cause eviction process here in the city of Portland – which I hope to do in tandem with Commissioner (Chloe) Eudaly soon.

Second of all, I want to make sure we're doing everything we can to increase the supply of affordable and workforce housing in this city. We've already got a pretty good plan in place. The housing bond has been passed; that's one great resource for us.

There's more the city can do in improving its own procedures and policies around housing. Specifically we can greatly reduce the cost and the

Israel Bayer: We have had an unprecedented cold spell this winter, creating a nightmare reality for people experiencing homelessness. Having four individuals freeze to death on the streets is devastating. Talk to us about your team's response to

both the cold weather and just the harsh realities you're facing around homelessness right off the bat.

Ted Wheeler: This has been a record-breaking severe weather event, and obviously it's been the top priority for my team. We've done a lot of things that haven't been done before. First and foremost, this administration pledged that anybody who was sleeping on the streets who wanted to come inside, we would make space at a shelter. If that meant we had to find additional facilities, we'd find additional facilities. We opened the Portland building, which is the city's main administrative building. It was initially opened as a day shelter. As conditions worsened, we made it a 24/7 shelter.

In addition, along with the joint office at Multnomah County and community-based providers, 600 new beds have been opened just for this weather emergency. I was over at St. Francis (a homeless center and dining hall). I went over this morning to talk to the folks at the American Legion Post where they opened up a shelter. We further directed first responders to check in on people and do welfare checks. The police and fire bureau have been out every night. They actually went out and got two vans that are being specifically deployed to take people to shelter and to take shelter workers to the shelter because the roads have been pretty rough.

I think the community response has gone great, but let's talk about what hasn't gone great. Four people dying on our streets is unconscionable. I cannot understand why, in a community that is this economically vibrant – a progressive community – why people are freezing to death



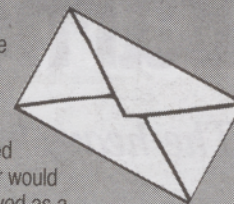
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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