

The energy exists to fuel something powerful

We've lost the general public's support and political will on homelessness.

I've been hearing these sentiments a lot lately in political circles.

That's nonsense.

It's true that many people are upset about homelessness in our community. It is also true that many people are upset about a whole range of problems facing our city, region and the world. That doesn't mean we've lost people's will to support folks having a safe place to call home.

I hear politicians say that they receive more complaints about street homelessness in our community than any other subject. Fair enough. But if Street Roots and other organizations wanted to organize campaigns to flood City Hall with phone calls and emails, we could.

To accept such a narrow narrative as truth is unsophisticated. It doesn't paint the entire picture.

While we respect our partners in the business community and many neighbors that are frustrated and organized around the issue — most poverty advocates are choosing to take the high road.

Nobody wants to fight over the idea of prioritizing housing and people experiencing homelessness. It's something that we all agree upon.

Instead we are focused on solutions and doing the work.

Each week, Street Roots vendors sell about 10,000 copies of the newspaper to the general public. I would argue that the vast majority of our readers don't believe homeless people should be swept out of the public eye without any alternatives in place.

The cold hard reality is if government and the public can't provide housing for people, then moving people around and sweeping camps is nothing more than cruel.

I've written a lot about the compassion fatigue on the streets — the idea that no matter what we do to scale up to solve the problem of homelessness, there are still homeless people. People begin to think that the problem can't be solved.

Here's the thing: Every mayor since the early 1980s has been faced with the overwhelming task of balancing how to support thousands of people experiencing homelessness in their community, political will and public safety for all.

The reality is, given the Oregon Legislature's measly investments on housing and upcoming federal cuts, it's probably going to get worse before it gets better. There is nowhere to run.

Homelessness is going to be a part of our community until we have the necessary resources to solve it. That doesn't mean we as a community or government can give up. In fact, it's the opposite.

That's why I believe the city and county will both get to a place of funding our homeless efforts equally. The budget process is just that — a process. There will be weeks of discussions and consideration of our needs, our priorities and our responsibility. Now is not the time to get into a fight over semantics.

Saying that, I hear a lot of talk of homeless sweeps and how the community believes that in order to get ahead of the problem we have to clean the city up. I'm not sure what that means. When you have thousands of people displaced, moving them from one park to another or one freeway underpass to another or one part of the city to another is simply a fool's game.

The reality is that Portland does care about people experiencing homelessness. Tens of thousands of people donate to nonprofits and foundations every year to help the homeless. Teams of volunteers, churches, businesses, politicians and neighbors work tirelessly to give people both shelter and empathy in the storm.

The question before us now is not how we are going to clean up our city. Our city is beautiful and thriving. The question is how are we going to take the energy surrounding homelessness and move our city into the direction of doing something

about it.

How about a one cent coffee tax for every cup of coffee sold in the city to go towards rent assistance? With the right people around the table we could make something like this happen.

If the hotels and motels and the tourist industry want homelessness out of downtown — they should bring it. There's money on the table. We're listening.

That's just two examples of the efforts we could be working on.

Right now we've a patchwork of Band-Aids created by what little resources we do have and the good will of the people of Portland.

In order to take the next steps and make the big lift we will need vision. We will need action. We will need sophisticated thinkers and doers and strategists working at a level Portland has never seen before.

I believe we can get there with the leadership we have in place. I don't believe we will get there by bickering over camp sweeps or succumbing to the distraction of squeaky wheels.

Let's take that energy and turn it into something powerful. Something that gives thousands of people a safe place to call home. Something we can all get behind.



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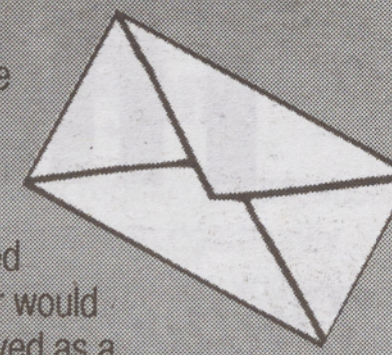
DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Israel Bayer

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Write in

If you would like to have something that you've written published in our pages, or would like to get involved as a member of our reporting staff, contact Managing Editor Joanne Zuhl at 503-228-5657, joanne@streetroots.org. We ask that all submissions include the author's name and contact information, if available.



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