

## Success lies in sustainable, systemic changes to housing

It comes as no surprise that the City Council next week is poised to extend the state of emergency to address homelessness. There is little on the ground that has changed since it was first declared in 2015 by then-mayor Charlie Hales. It has already been renewed once, in 2016.

But that doesn't mean a lot hasn't been done. After two years, the city, county, private organizations and businesses have

accomplished more than meets the eye:

- We've added hundreds of emergency shelter beds for times of

harsh weather conditions. The city launched three new permanent shelters, and an initiative of health care and housing organizations intends to build 382 new affordable housing units. Since the declaration, we've cleared the way to site storage facilities, restrooms and needle disposal containers.

- Policywise, the city passed an inclusionary zoning ordinance that requires apartment and condo developers include low-income units in their housing projects. Developments 20 or more units must reserve 20 percent of those units for households making less than 80 percent of the median family income, or just under \$60,000 for a family of four in Portland.

- In 2016, Multnomah County residents passed a \$258 million bond to build permanent affordable housing, and the city enacted construction excise and short-term rental taxes to support housing efforts. And we've enacted mandatory relocation assistance and extended eviction notices to give families and individuals a better chance at landing on their feet.

All of this is great work. Still, we are not keeping up with our population growth and our rising housing costs. The city reports being short about 23,000 housing units – a seemingly perpetual shortfall. We still have an inadequate number of emergency shelter beds, and rents and housing costs continue to outpace incomes and available units. Family-sized apartments are among the most scarce, and if a family has a child with special needs, or if one or more spouse is unable to work, or if life happens, the most vulnerable families are simply pushed off the edge.

So the city is extending the state of emergency, but this time with a mandate that within six months, the Portland Housing Bureau and the Joint Office of Homeless Services will determine criteria to end the housing emergency and recommendations on how to meet that criteria by April 9, 2019 – the date this latest extension would expire. That's a lot of pressure for a city that's rolled through

multiple "plans to end homelessness," but then, people who are experiencing poverty and homelessness have been under the screw for years.

We do ask ourselves, though, whether this latest deadline is the cart or the horse: are the numbers the target or is it sustainability?

Because the homeless and housing crisis didn't begin when we started noticing people on the streets, or when white, middle-class families could no longer afford their homes. It didn't begin when people started noticing homeless camps, or seeing gentrification or even watching "Portlandia."

It started back when we decided not to protect tenants rights to housing and instead let the highest possible prices rule the market. It started when we took housing for granted. In other words, it's been a long time coming.

We fully support the work being done to get people off the streets and into shelters. It's what we should be doing. But we're guarded in our optimism, because the crisis is not going to end if our goal is a street-level correction on the numbers.

Here's what we all need to keep in mind: Success doesn't mean just money to build or support housing – although we definitely need additional dedicated revenue streams; it also means we put in place regulations to keep the housing profiteers from running away with the city – and not just for the short-term. Along with regulations, it takes initiatives that break the

cycle of homelessness and help preserve people's housing before the situation becomes catastrophic. This is at the heart of the crisis.

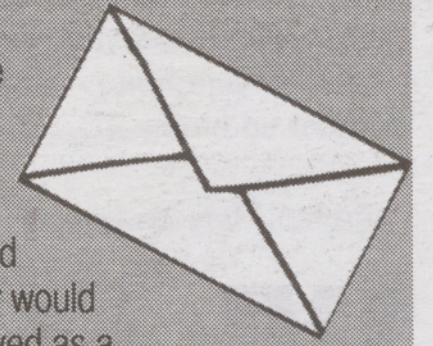
We've experienced brick and mortar accomplishments, and each and every one is critical, but the city also needs to reinforce the collective mindset that is the real energy behind our state of emergency: a community-wide conviction that our homeless crisis and our housing emergency can and must be corrected. We can't accept evictions, rent hikes and \$1.5 million condos in what were once middle-income neighborhoods as the new normal. And we are undercutting the essential foundation to real change by promising point-in-time, political successes such as shelter beds or statistics, if the machinery behind homelessness is allowed to grind on. Not all of that is within the city's power, but it's all interconnected, and the city can be a leader in facilitating real changes on the state and even national level. However, if we simultaneously prepare for success and plan for failure, we're only halfway in the game. We don't have to live with the failure on our streets day in and day out when there's room for all of us on the winning team.

### EDITORIAL

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