

Real progress statewide vs. street-level sweeps

Mark jotted a letter on a sheet of amber-green colored paper that he tucked into a Street Roots newspaper. He did this over and over, writing letters to Oregon legislators and their staffers, imploring them to make more housing affordable to more people.

A few weeks ago, Mark traveled to Salem with several other Street Roots vendors and a busload of Oregon Housing Alliance advocates to argue for the importance of increasing the document recording fee. Street Roots is a member of the Oregon Housing Alliance.

I'm happy to report that

Mark was a part of a winning effort. On March 3, the Oregon Legislature increased the document recording fee from \$20 to \$60. The fee is applied to the first page of real estate documents at the time they're recorded, and is projected to bring in an additional \$30 million each year for affordable housing, rent assistance and first-time homebuyer assistance. A quarter of this funding is directed toward veterans.

There were other successes on the housing front during the recently concluded short session.

One bill awaiting the governor's signature funds assistance for towns and cities for residents who spend more than half their income on rent.

The legislature also voted to create a task force to study racial disparities in homeownership.

Another successful bill waives some licensing fees in rural communities, putting more electricians, plumbers and other subcontractors to work building affordable housing.

Quirky – but a small gain nonetheless – was the fee waiver for transforming land zoned for a cemetery into affordable housing.

Funding was also allotted for shelters around the state – including a youth shelter dreamed up by a McKay High School student in Salem.

The legislature also sent a constitutional amendment to voters this November that would loosen some constraints around how affordable housing bonds can be pooled with other funds, which will immediately matter when we hopefully have the opportunity to vote for a Metro Regional Housing Bond in that same election.

And just this past Wednesday, the Portland City Council made permanent the relocation fees landlords pay when they issue no-cause evictions or raise rent by more than 10 percent. They voted to expand this requirement in most cases to single-unit landlords.

While all this legislation focused on how to make housing conditions better, other legislation focused on another element of our housing crisis – camp sweeps. This was problematic from the get-go because an emphasis on sweeps is an emphasis on making life more difficult for our neighbors who live outside.

The legislature passed a bill that allows the

city of Portland to enter into agreements with the Oregon Department of Transportation to do camp sweeps. Some land in Portland is managed by the city, some by the Oregon Department of Transportation, and each operates under a different legal settlement that resulted when the Oregon Law Center litigated on behalf of campers who were homeless.

On face value, the settlement with the Oregon Department of Transportation sets up a longer period of notification for homeless campers, but in practice, there's a significant exception: When "no trespassing signs" are posted, ODOT is allowed to sweep homeless folks after 24 hours, the same as Portland.

The new legislation stipulates that "no trespassing" sweeps conducted under this agreement between ODOT and the city must abide by a longer notification period of 48 hours.

This legislation could lead to some better notification and transparency. The city of Portland operates with more transparency than ODOT, each week listing the number of calls it receives reporting homeless camps and the number of sweeps it conducts.

But the problem is that the emphasis

continues to be on sweeps. Repeated camp sweeps are traumatizing, making life harder for our neighbors who have no home to shelter them. We must demand that our actions actually make life better.

Hundreds of Portlanders report homeless camps to the city each week. This past week alone, the city received 449 reports through its One Point of Contact System. Last week, 49 "campsite cleanups" were conducted by the city; 59 more are scheduled for

this week.

I wish more of these phone calls and emails were focused on constructive responses, so that our city government hears from citizens who want to better support our houseless neighbors. We need to support organized camps, connection to services, shelters, health care, transit, hygiene services – all the ways that life can actually be better while people work to overcome homelessness.

And we have to step up again and again for renter protections and affordable housing.

Please make sure the city officials hear these demands louder than demands for camp sweeps. This matters.

Statewide, we made some housing gains this past month in the legislature, but we need many gains, and big gains.

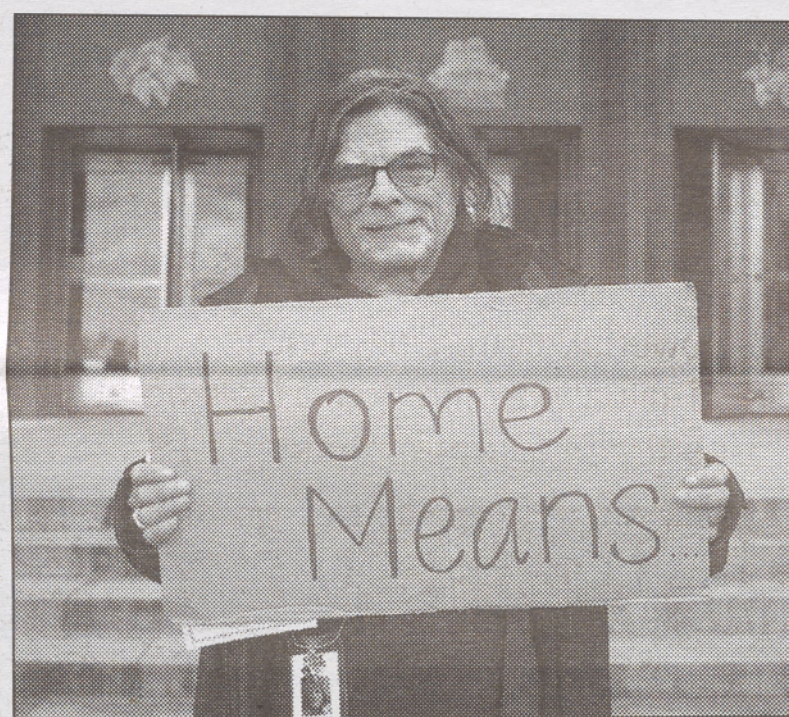
Let Mark's letter be a letter to us all. Imagine that handwriting on amber-green paper, and how it is attached to one person who absolutely deserves the best of life's opportunities. And then imagine thousands and thousands more people across our state who deserve to thrive. As long as some of us are suffering the scarcity of housing and the danger of the streets, it matters to us all.



DIRECTOR'S DESK

By Kaia Sand

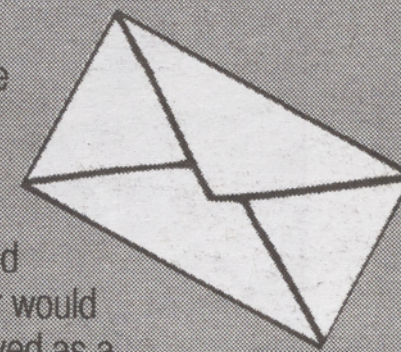
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Street Roots vendor Mark, on the Capitol steps in Salem.

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 Executive 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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