

Nick Fish: My year-end report to the community



Nick Fish is the commissioner in charge of Portland Parks and Recreation and the Bureau of Environmental Services.

BY NICK FISH
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

I've had the honor of serving on the Portland City Council for nearly a decade. At the end of each year, I share a report with the community. You can read the full report on my website, portlandoregon.gov/fish. But I wanted to take this opportunity to highlight a few key issues that may be of interest to Street Roots readers – housing, climate change and the arts.

Housing

Affordable housing is the reason I first ran for City Council, and it continues to be my highest priority. The market is not meeting the needs of too many Portlanders – older adults on a fixed income, low-income families, minimum-wage workers, and the formerly homeless.

I believe government's role is to step in and fill the gaps that the market will never serve. That's why I helped to lead the Metro housing bond campaign that voters overwhelmingly passed in November. It will mean an additional \$652.8 million for affordable housing in the metro region. And the passage of companion Measure 102 allows us to stretch those dollars by partnering with trusted nonprofit developers.

A special thank you to Street Roots for being a champion for the Metro bond!

Last year, at my urging, Portland and Multnomah County adopted a shared goal of 2,000 additional units of supportive housing in 10 years. Supportive housing combines deeply affordable and safe homes with intensive services for people struggling with mental illness and/or addiction.

About two-thirds of the people in our community living outside report having a mental illness, suffering from addiction, facing a chronic medical condition, or a combination of the three.

A little over a year ago, I learned I have abdominal cancer. Cancer doesn't discriminate. But I'm one of the lucky ones – good health insurance, great doctors and nurses at the OHSU Knight Cancer Institute, a loving and supportive family and community, and a safe roof over my head.

Imagine fighting cancer while living on the street. It's a lethal combination – homelessness coupled with a chronic illness. And it helps to explain why 79 people died on our streets in 2017.

That's where supportive housing plays an important role. Having a safe place to call home can be the difference for someone

who's struggling.

Supportive housing isn't cheap. It costs around \$60 per night. But the cost of not doing something is even higher – \$210 per night for a bed in Multnomah County Jail, \$500 for an emergency room visit, or \$900 for a night at the hospital.

A recent report by consulting firm ECONorthwest independently confirmed that supportive housing is the best tool to address chronic homelessness, and we're making steady progress toward our goal.

Climate Change

I am deeply committed to both preparing our community for climate change and bringing more nature into the city. As Commissioner-in-Charge of Portland Parks & Recreation and the Bureau of Environmental Services (BES), I am working to strengthen the alignment between these two "green" bureaus.

Working with the Army Corps of Engineers, Parks and BES are welcoming native salmon back to our city. For the first time in nearly 100 years, salmon in the Willamette River will be able to use Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge as an important rest stop on their journey. That's because we replaced a small pipe with a new "salmon subway" – a large, natural-bottom culvert.

This is our second "salmon sanctuary" project, following a successful collaboration at Crystal Springs in Southeast Portland. I'm proud to report that salmon can be found in almost half of Portland's 300 miles of streams. In 2019, we'll be working to add a third salmon sanctuary – Tryon Creek.

Last year, the BES launched an innovative venture to turn waste into clean energy while earning money for our ratepayers. We call it "poop to power."

Here's how it works: every year, BES processes over 30 billion gallons of wastewater. A natural byproduct of sewage treatment is methane, a potent greenhouse gas. For years, the City has been capturing a portion of this methane gas to produce electricity. The rest gets burned and released into the atmosphere. When the project is fully up and running next year, we're going to capture that methane, convert it to renewable natural gas to fuel the city's vehicles and sell the surplus to NW Natural.

That means we'll replace over 1 million gallons of dirty diesel fuel with renewable natural gas, eliminate 21,000 tons of greenhouse gasses, and generate upwards of \$3 million for our ratepayers – every year. A triple win!

Arts and Culture

I'm passionate about arts and culture. They are important to our local economy and our brand, they inspire us, and they make our community special.

This year, City Council adopted, and we began implementing, a plan to address arts affordability – responding to the rapid growth and housing crisis that is displacing artists and arts organizations. The goal is to protect and expand affordable arts spaces through collaborative, proactive action by the City, private and non-profit developers, community groups, and artists.

I worked with my Council colleagues to secure an early win – hiring an arts concierge service team in the Bureau of Development Services. The team will help artists navigate the unique building codes that apply to them. We are also exploring ways to showcase and support local artists through Portland Parks & Recreation. And we're developing a universal permit for film and TV productions, streamlining the process and strengthening our reputation as a great place to do business.

Conclusion

I'm proud to share this news with you, but it's only a small part of what our city has accomplished over the past year.

We launched a partnership with nonprofit Project SEARCH to create opportunities and job experience for people with intellectual disabilities. We invested in safer streets and lowered speed limits on residential streets. We recognized small businesses who are going the extra mile to support older adults. And we joined trusted partners DePaul Treatment Centers and Cascade AIDS Project in calling for renewed public investment in inclusive and accessible healthcare.

It is an honor to serve as your City Commissioner. Thank you, and happy holidays.

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