

# Homelessness a key challenge for next governor

A crisis that extends across the state

By LAUREN DAKE  
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The legacy of Oregon's next governor could hinge largely on a single issue: How well she handles the state's growing homelessness crisis.

For years, Oregon has underbuilt housing, underfunded the mental health system and, more recently, battled wildfires that have wiped out homes. The pandemic devastated already weak safety nets. Now, the unsheltered crisis has reached every corner of the state.

The three women hoping to be governor — Republican Christine Drahan, unaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson and Democrat Tina Kotek — have all promised to make a substantial dent in the problem. And voters have signaled repeatedly it is among their gravest concerns.

Drahan has said she would declare a state of emergency on homelessness if she were elected. The move, she said, would quickly free up money for addiction and behavioral health services. But Drahan's campaign glossed over Kotek's call for a statewide emergency declaration two years ago to allow cities and the state to more easily site homeless shelters. That same year, Drahan led her caucus on a walkout that killed myriad legislation, including money to increase shelter capacity.

Johnson has promised to tackle the crisis with compassion and accountability. She vowed to bring together those with different political philosophies. But for a candidate who preaches unity, her tone is often divisive. She calls names and belittles. She quipped to the New York Times that Portland, known as the City of Roses, was more like the "city of roaches." And she disparaged those who questioned the comment, dismissing them with the popular right-wing cudgel of being overly "woke."

No candidate has more experience on the topic than Kotek, the former longtime Oregon House speaker. She has muscled through legislation to make Oregon the first state in the nation with statewide rent control, and she championed an effort to effectively end single-family zoning in cities. But that legislative history could also hurt her if voters connect her lengthy influence to an unacceptable status quo.

## Drahan: Focus on substance abuse and mental illness

The state has a housing crisis. But Drahan said the state's bigger failure is

**THE THREE WOMEN HOPING TO BE GOVERNOR — REPUBLICAN CHRISTINE DRAHAN, UNAFFILIATED CANDIDATE BETSY JOHNSON AND DEMOCRAT TINA KOTEK — HAVE ALL PROMISED TO MAKE A SUBSTANTIAL DENT IN THE PROBLEM. AND VOTERS HAVE SIGNALLED REPEATEDLY IT IS AMONG THEIR GRAVEST CONCERNS.**

not supporting people with substance abuse and mental health issues.

"My opponents will say a lack of affordable housing is the primary driver, and while our housing costs are certainly a factor, a housing first response is a failed approach that glosses over the more inconvenient truths about the crisis in our streets," Drahan said in written responses to a series of questions from Oregon Public Broadcasting.

Oregon is short at least 111,000 housing units, mainly ones that would help lower-income families.

"When it comes to homelessness, specifically, there is a lot of research that has come out in the last decade that fundamentally homelessness is about the inability to afford housing," Josh Lehner, an economist with the state, told Oregon Public Broadcasting in an earlier interview. "It seems self-explanatory, but I don't know if that can be repeated enough. There are other places in the country that have mental health issues, drug addiction issues and high poverty issues, and at the same time they have lower rates of homelessness ... People can still have mental health issues or drug addiction issues or live in poverty, but still have a roof over their heads because the housing is more affordable in other places."

Drahan said she would work to repeal Measure 110, which voters passed in 2020 to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of drugs. The measure also dedicates marijuana tax dollars to fund addiction recovery services, which Drahan noted has been bungled so far.

Drahan also made the case that the state needs to stop "enabling homelessness." Her Democratic opponent, Kotek, pushed a bill that protects people who are camping from being fined on public lands if there are no other alternatives. Drahan said the bill "effectively legalized camping" in the state.

"To solve homelessness in the long term we have to solve our addiction crisis as a state," Drahan said.

## Johnson: Blame feckless politicians

Johnson started serving in the state House in 2001 and served in the Senate since 2005 until 2021, when she stepped down to launch her bid for governor.

Despite holding a position of power for more than two decades, when asked what the specific causes of Oregon's homelessness crisis was, Johnson blamed politicians.

The reasons for homelessness, she wrote in response to questions, range from the failure of our mental health system to the lack of affordable housing.

But it's become a crisis, she said, "because we have elected too many feckless politicians who would rather talk about homelessness than do something about it and who go home at night unconcerned by the number of those who are sleeping on the streets with destroyed lives as the problem continues to erode our communities and their safety."

Johnson, who was the co-chair of the powerful budget committee, has carved out a reputation for financial savvy and striving for fiscal accountability. She said that is part of why she opposed Project Turnkey, an effort to turn distressed motels and hotels into emergency shelters spearheaded, in part, by her opponent, Kotek.

Johnson called the effort a "short-term idea that is being turned into an ongoing mistake."

"Buying out motel and hotel rooms all over the state and filling them with homeless people only creates more problems," Johnson said. "Many of the nonprofits who are being left in charge will likely be unable to sustain services once the federal and state funds stop. It is an unsustainable model."

Johnson instead threw her support behind an effort to transform the former unused Wapato Jail into a high-barrier homeless shelter. The shelter has strict rules for those who stay there, including a sobriety requirement. Now called Bybee Lakes Hope Center, Johnson secured a \$2 million investment from the state to help

the project become a reality. The project has so far relied largely on private donations. When Oregon Public Broadcasting asked Johnson if she financially scrutinized Bybee Lakes, she said she believes in Alan Evans, the man running the program.

"I have confidence in Bybee Lakes because I know Alan Evans has deep experience over two decades helping homeless people get their feet under them again. I've seen it in action," Johnson wrote. "The Hope Center is working very hard to help people, and it's working."

## Kotek: The longest track record on housing

In a primary debate with her Democratic opponent Tobias Read in April, Kotek touted her long record of pushing for money to alleviate Oregon's housing crisis.

Read simply replied with: "How's it going?"

Read's point is one Kotek's foes have been eager to take up in the general election race, as they attempt to tie her to an unacceptable status quo.

Kotek has a strong housing pitch: More than any other lawmaker, she's focused on housing issues. She's secured millions for affordable housing projects and permanent supportive housing. She's pushed to increase shelter capacity and invest \$500 million in rental assistance programs. She was the loudest champion of including \$75 million to turn distressed motels into homeless shelters.

Yet, she's also served as one of the most powerful politicians in the state for years and despite the investment and the influence, the state's homelessness crisis continues to mount.

Kotek has to convince voters that given the chance to be governor, that would change.

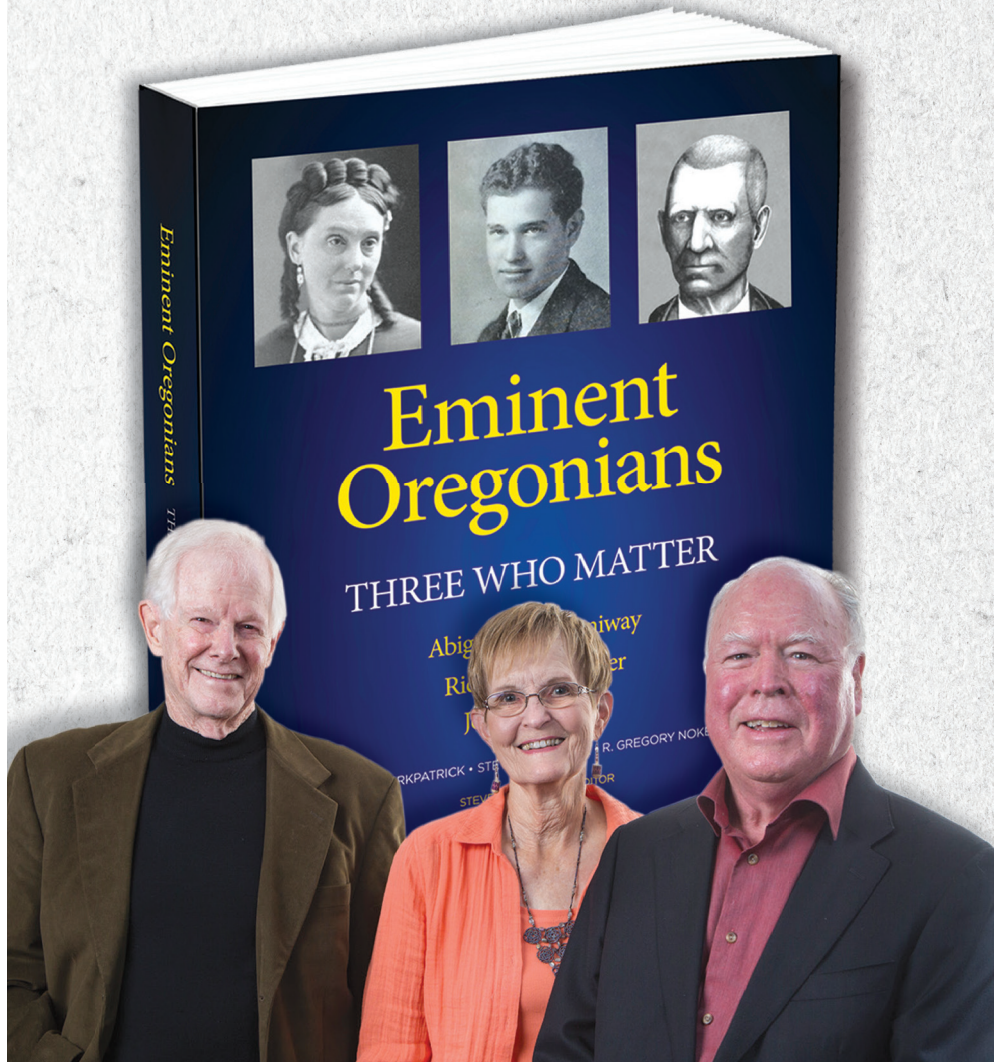
The Democrat said if elected she would make it a goal to end unsheltered homelessness for veterans, families with children, unaccompanied young adults and people 65 years and older by 2025.

Within her first 30 days, Kotek said she would form an emergency management team to work directly with community leaders to address the crisis. She said she would push state agencies to ensure they are efficiently using the state dollars they have been given, and she cited the Oregon Health Authority's use of \$500 million to expand the state's behavioral health system.

"I will not allow any more excuses of why local providers and governments can't work better together," Kotek said.

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