

EDITORIALS & OPINIONS

The Bulletin
AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

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Should councilors
or voters fill
council vacancies?

Voters or Bend city councilors? Who should pick who fills vacancies on the Bend City Council?

It seems Bend city councilors may hold on to their power to fill vacancies, rather than turning the decision over to voters. That's the direction taken Wednesday by a subcommittee of the Bend City Council looking at revising council rules. And it comes just a few years after an ugly political fight erupted in 2019 when councilors made an appointment to fill a vacancy themselves.

That fight began after then-Councilor Sally Russell won the election to become Bend's mayor. Her win created an opening for her councilor spot. The council devised a process to fill it. They accepted applications. Applicants were checked to ensure they had the qualifications to serve. Candidates were interviewed. Councilors tried to narrow down the many applicants.

The process was open to the public. But there were conversations and emails exchanged that largely didn't become public until after the choice was made.

It led to charges of backroom deals — that the fix was in. Councilor Barb Campbell accused Russell of betraying the principles she ran on because Russell voted in 2019 for the eventual choice, Chris Piper. And that was perhaps some of the milder criticism.

There was some debate at the time that the council should wait until the next election and let voters decide. That's what we argued should have happened. The counterargument was that many important deci-

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sions had to be made quickly by the council, such as setting budgets and priorities. It was better to have any new councilor participate than have them join later. There was also the possibility that councilors could be deadlocked 3-3 on important issues, if they had to wait a few months for an election. And, of course, elections have costs.

Those arguments won. Letting voters decide lost. And those same arguments are winning again. Is that what you want? You can let Bend city councilors know at council@bendoregon.gov.

Courts block Bend's effort
to spend less on tourism

If you think Bend should spend less on promoting tourism, well, it tried. The courts have stopped it.

The Oregon Court of Appeals affirmed on Wednesday a lower court decision against the city.

The city of Bend passed an ordinance in 2017 to lower the total percentage of total local transient lodging tax revenues from 35.4% to 31.2%.

Those taxes are basically the taxes people pay when they stay in a hotel. The Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association and two local hotel owners challenged the ordinance in court.

The city has argued the plaintiffs didn't face real or probable injury. The courts disagreed.

The city also argued that the overall percentage allocated to tourism remained above 30% and that was

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sufficient to meet the law. The courts disagreed, saying there was also an unambiguous prohibition from decreasing the amount for tourism promotion on or after July 2, 2003.

It may seem like Bend doesn't need tourism promotion. But if the city of Bend wants to make a change like this, it would seem to need a change in state law.



Flaws in Bend's housing plans

BY TED BAYER

Brenna Visser's July 30 article about Bend's housing dilemma highlights key elements of the crisis but fails to call out real flaws in the city's planned effort to create affordable middle housing.

City staff and elected officials have focused solely on diminished housing supply as the source of the crisis.



Bayer

In recent presentations, a staff member has suggested that systemic racism, NIMBYism and resistance to change are primary causes of the reduced affordable housing supply and further that Deschutes County — with a population in 2016 of 190,000 residents — “underproduced 150,000 homes during 2010-16.” A typo? If not, drop a zero, and you are likely closer to the reality. Similarly, the \$650,000 median home price utilized in those presentations applies to single-family residences; median prices and rents for middle housing were not provided.

This approach, with its failure to examine relevant facts and an us-versus-them hostility toward any who question the city's proposed manner of implementing House Bill 2001, disturbs many residents who are concerned about the shortage of affordable housing for those working here. It also ignores the impact of a major cause of the crisis: the nature of Bend's current housing demand.

GUEST COLUMN

Bend's population increased by 35% between 2010 and 2020 and has grown more in 2021. With these new residents, housing demand has skyrocketed. A significant part of this increase recently has been from retirees who, after cashing out market gains in their homes in major urban areas, have moved here because of Bend's livability and relative affordability. Since COVID-19 started in early 2020, Bend also has become a Zoom town, again because of its livability and perceived lower cost. That surge has brought many new residents who, while perhaps not so cash-rich as retirees, continue to work remotely in the cities from which they migrated at much higher salaries than those offered here.

Finally, the same qualities that have drawn retirees and Zoomies continue to attract tourists. As a result, short-term rental property, although now more regulated, has drawn cash investors simply seeking a return on their money.

These three buyer groups are the primary cause of a median price for a single-family residence over \$625,000.

These demand drivers also have a common element: Few of the buyers and no short-term renters are employed in Deschutes County. Consequently, while our population continues to swell, “help wanted” and “now hiring” signs proliferate; and St. Charles hospital, the only hospital system in Central Oregon, faces

a severe staffing shortage. It is these missing workers for whom the city ostensibly desires to provide affordable housing. Yet, as the economist cited in Ms. Visser's article confirms, simply increasing supply will not result in a decline in median housing costs but “might help” affordability. He does not indicate how increased supply will help, and neither does the city. Instead, staff and elected officials just think it will — even when they are aware of other measures within their control that definitely will affect affordability.

Ms. Visser details some of those solutions at the end of her article; others are set forth in state regulations. Council says it is considering a number of them, but since affordable housing is so critically needed, why some or all of them are not being implemented along with the HB 2001 code amendments is puzzling. Demonizing those who challenge not your objectives but rather your methods and trivializing their concerns over forced street parking may be easier than doing a thorough analysis and then implementing measures that actually work. Retirees, Zoomies, tourists and others will keep buying and renting housing here — so long as Bend remains livable. Our leaders have tools that could enable them to create affordable middle housing for those who work here without diminishing the character of our town. Given the stakes, Bend residents and workers are wondering, why not implement them right now?

■ Ted Bayer lives in Bend.

Letters policy

We welcome your letters. Letters should be limited to one issue, contain no more than 250 words and include the writer's phone number and address for verification. We edit letters for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject poetry, personal attacks, form letters, letters submitted elsewhere and those appropriate for other sections of The Bulletin. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

Guest columns

Your submissions should be between 550 and 650 words and must include the writer's phone number and address for verification. We edit submissions for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons. We reject those submitted elsewhere. Locally submitted columns alternate with national columnists and commentaries. Writers are limited to one letter or guest column every 30 days.

How to submit

Please address your submission to either My Nickel's Worth or Guest Column and mail, fax or email it to The Bulletin. Email submissions are preferred.

Email: letters@bendbulletin.com

Write: My Nickel's Worth/Guest Column
P.O. Box 6020
Bend, OR 97708

Fax: 541-385-5804

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What should be done about homelessness?

BY RON SMITH

Homelessness should not be considered normal or an acceptable life choice. It is neither of these.

It is a visible symptom that something has gone seriously wrong, and it should trigger a strong response from a robust social safety net designed to set things right again. Think of this safety net as scaffolding with many interlocking parts offering many levels of support activated by individual needs. Here's how such a system might operate.

Stage 1. As soon as a tent appears on public property, social services would spring into action. A potentially homeless person would be visited by a social worker who will assess the situation. If it is clear that there are no means of immediately obtaining conventional accommodations,

the new client would be escorted to a temporary intake shelter (along with their secured possessions). This shelter might be along the lines of a supervised military-style barracks with basic accommodations and amenities (communal restrooms and cafeterias).

Stage 2. Once safely housed and fed, a longer-term social worker would be assigned and intake screening would start immediately. First, identification would be attempted and kin folk contacted, if appropriate. Next, a physical exam would be performed and a mental health screening would be undertaken. Depending on the outcome of these screenings, the appropriate health services would be engaged. If the client has been in the military, VA resources would be activated, if applicable.

After a personal history has been pieced together and a review of per-

sonal goals completed, the client would transition from the temporary shelter to the next setting that is considered most appropriate. For some, this may be a clinical setting, but for most, this transition would be to a supervised dorm-like pod with social support.

Each pod would be small, perhaps accommodating a dozen folks (including partners and children as appropriate). The pods would be distributed throughout the city neighborhoods to promote normalization.

Stage 3. If the client decides to remain in the local community going forward, the social worker and client would work together to set goals and a plan for achieving independence as soon as possible. Job placement would

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Clients can opt out of this support system at any time, but if they do, they must leave the local area. Is this an intrusive process? Yes and for good reason. Restoring independence for a homeless person is no easy or painless task. But as a civilized society, we have an obligation to support those experiencing significant life issues.

be a point of emphasis. Most jobs would be in essential services with training, transportation and initial wage subsidies provided as needed.

Once stable employment is achieved, the client would transition to a small, supervised mainstream (possibly subsidized) apartment. As more independence is demonstrated, scaffolding would be reduced until full community integration is achieved. But regular social worker contacts would be permanent.

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system at any time, but if they do, they must leave the local area. Is this an intrusive process? Yes and for good reason. Restoring independence for a homeless person is no easy or painless task. But as a civilized society, we have an obligation to support those experiencing significant life issues. Let's move on from hand wringing to action. In my next installment, I'll explain how to fund and administer these kinds of scaffolded support systems.

■ Ron Smith lives in Bend.