

Questions for Portland City Council Candidates

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In your opinion, what are the top three issues facing Portland and its residents?

Economic Opportunity – People want to live in Portland; however the cost of living exceeds what most people can earn. We need to create the conditions that allow well-paying employers to grow in Portland. We also need to lower the cost of living by creating the conditions for more housing (with increased supply driving down housing cost) and better non-automotive transportation so people can live car-free or with fewer cars (lowering transportation cost).

Quality of Life – People want to live in Portland because it is a great place. The city government plays a key role in creating and preserving our quality of life. Multiple years of budget cuts coupled with the larger economic crisis are diminishing front-line city services (trash collection, police, social services) at a time when they are most needed. Our budgets will continue to be tight for the coming years; we must prioritize those services that preserve quality of life for residents and visitors, rather than entrenched bureaucratic interests.

Education – City government must prioritize a high-quality K-12 school system. An excellent educational system gives Portlanders the resources needed to pursue higher education and build a career. Additionally, city leaders must also aggressively advocate for strong community college, undergraduate and graduate programs in the Portland area.

In which ways can the city improve transportation? What are your short, medium and long-term goals for Portland's transportation?

- Reform Metro. Metro routes and scheduling need to become consumer-driven, i.e., designed by bus riders and prospective bus riders rather than administrators.
- Consolidate the many transit providers serving the region. Metro, Zoom, South Portland and RTP do not need separate administrative structures.
- Advocate for increased federal operational funding for Metro. Metro ridership will increase when service and routes improve, which requires more funding than the member municipalities can afford.
- Continue to integrate non-SOV priorities into our development review process by incorporating non-automotive transportation elements into review of all new development proposals.
- Invest in pedestrian infrastructure and maintenance - one major asset of Portland in comparison to most surrounding communities is the ability to walk from one's home to work, schools, shops and services. The attractiveness and feasibility of walking is often diminished by unsafe road crossings and poorly maintained or non-existent sidewalks. We must maintain pedestrian infrastructure with the same diligence as automobile infrastructure.

Short-term – Year-round, passable sidewalks throughout the peninsula;

Medium-term – Metro offering schedules that make reliance on public transit a reasonable choice for those whose use of transit is driven by neither necessity nor ideology;

Long-term – Commuter transit, both bus and rail, that reinforces downtown Portland as the employment center of the region.

What are Portland's strengths and weaknesses regarding affordable housing? How can we improve the weaknesses and expand on the strengths?

Our strength in city government is that we support, both financially and politically, the creation of new affordable apartments. This is a significant change from 10 – 12 years ago when the conventional wisdom was to not propose affordable apartment development in Portland.

Another strength that we have (without government intervention) is the ability to live car-free (in at least portions of the city). Increasingly researchers on housing issues include transportation cost in their analysis of affordability. The city government should be doing more to promote car-free living in terms of both transportation and development policy.

Our primary weaknesses are:

Continued (although diminishing) hostility to residential density as reflected in our zoning code. Restoring the density of the existing built environment can increase the supply of housing which can lower the cost.

Failure to see housing, particularly affordable housing, development as integral to our redevelopment efforts (the redevelopment of Bayside to date would be the prime example of this phenomenon).

When, and in what ways, are TIFs (tax increment financing) appropriate and where are opportunities to utilize this tool in your view?

In my 2007 response to the League questionnaire, I said that “the City confuses commercial real estate development with economic development.” The City’s use of TIFs over the last several years is perhaps the clearest expression of that phenomenon. I think TIFs are an appropriate tool when used to improve the economic climate for all within an area of the city rather than to promote an individual business. For example, I would like to see the city to use TIF revenues in Bayside to build sidewalks and transit infrastructure rather than to finance individual buildings/businesses.

The City’s current TIF policy is dated and needs revision. I would like to see the City Council take this item up in the coming year.

Given the city's financial constraints, where do you believe the city should trim and/or raise revenues?

On the revenue side, we need to do a better job of maximizing revenues in our quasi-business operations. Examples include Riverside Golf Course, the Portland Ice Arena and the Ocean Gateway terminal. In my opinion, city staff is not particularly experienced or adept at running business; we should consider contracting out the operations or even divesting ourselves entirely of these kinds of facilities.

On the expense side, we need to push a) consolidation of school and city non-academic functions and b) regionalization of services, particularly fire and public works.

How would you prioritize Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) monies in Portland?

First, I would distinguish between CDBG funding for Social Services and CDBG funding for Development. We are fortunate in that we are one of the few communities in the country that is allowed to use CDBG funds for social services. This allows us to direct 30% of our allocation to addressing the extraordinary demand for services that we experience as the largest city in the state. I think the City could target these funds better by relying more on our Social Services division for guidance than we do at present. The Social Services staff has a better understanding than our appointed committee of the unmet need in the community and is best positioned to target the funds most effectively. Our current system struggles with the competing impulses to fund new endeavors while rewarding "old friends." The result is an unsatisfying hybrid that makes no one happy.

Regarding the development portion of CDBG funds, my answer would be similar to the answer I gave on TIFs above. We should be using the funds to invest in the assets that make our entire community strong – in particular sidewalk and transit infrastructure – rather than individual projects. Portland's competitive advantage in the region is that it IS a city; we should be using these "extra" funds to strengthen our urban characteristics rather than mimicking suburbia.

What is your impression of the Old Port and Arts Districts?

Positive. I moved here 13 years ago and the Congress Street corridor was desolate. It is wonderful to travel Congress Street on a summer evening now and see so many different kinds of people out and about. Commercial rents in the Arts District are still low enough that unproven newcomers can take a chance on starting a business. The Old Port is a little worse for wear due to the current recession, but I think its long-term prospects are good.

I think the health of both areas can and should be improved by increasing residential opportunities. Portland is one of the few places in Maine that can offer true 24/7 neighborhoods – again, this is a key component of our competitive advantage.

What changes, if any, would you like to see regarding liquor/entertainment licensing and regulations?

We need to move away from blanket solutions like the 100' dispersal ordinance. Instead our efforts should focus on enforcement of existing ordinances that govern behavioral issues like overserving. We do need help from the state in creating a licensing regime that allows the city to revoke a liquor license within a reasonable time frame while protecting a bar owner's right to due process.

Do you support the Charter Commission's recommendation for a popularly elected mayor elected through Ranked Choice Voting? (yes/no). Why or why not?

Yes. A popularly elected mayor creates a focal point, both internal and external, for the City's policy direction. Having the mayor elected rather than appointed creates a direct connection between the electorate and the executive function, rather than a bureaucracy insulated from the people.

Do you support giving the right to vote to all legal residents of Portland?

Yes.