

Questions for Portland City Council Candidates

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

1. **The Economy:** Portland is faring better than most places in terms of jobs and employment as well as expectations of stability and job growth, as evidenced by the recently released Portland's Economic Scorecard 2010 (Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce). However the economy at large needs to recover in order for Portland to grow. We should focus on policy that protects and enhances the quality of place here, which in turn brings new business, investment, and jobs. Supporting niche economic drivers in the City and growing our commercial base have to be policy objectives.
2. **Community Infrastructure:** This is a broad theme, but covers everything from our roads and sidewalks to sewer and storm water systems to our public buildings, parks and trails, and piers. In my mind infrastructure also includes community services, businesses, and amenities that make up the whole environment and experience of living and working in Portland. Framing infrastructure as top 3 'issue' for me means first how we maintain what we have and fix what is broken, and second how we invest in both near and longer term improvements. We have to protect the quality of our neighborhoods.
3. **Schools and Education:** Providing a quality public education is the number one responsibility of local government. I believe Portland Schools are on the right track, and showing signs of systemic improvements. My goal as a city councilor and as a Portland resident is for the city's schools to be the best in Maine. If we enable and support creative approaches within the system, and achieve excellence, more young families and small business owners will want to live in the city. Our numerous private schools and higher education centers such as USM and Maine Law can also be better integrated into the city and provide long term touch points for economic stability and growth.

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

Portland's series of arterial roads heading into and out of downtown are overburdened and do not function smoothly. In District 3, Brighton Ave, Forest Ave, outer Congress, and Westbrook St move a lot of cars, but do not serve the neighborhoods and residents as well as they serve the through traffic. Ways to improve this situation include reducing the number of cars (unlikely), and reengineering certain sections of roads and certain problem intersections.

Short term, I would like to see more pedestrian crossings, speed limit reductions in places such as Westbrook St, speed enforcement on major traffic areas such as outer Congress, and neighborhood street traffic calming measures enacted.

Medium term goals include adopting a complete streets policy, such that every road project incorporates elements of pedestrian and bicycle accommodation, and not as an afterthought. The more biking and walking infrastructure we have, the more active we become as a population, the less we drive, and the more we become locally connected. Another medium term goal is public transit improvements. We need to increase bus ridership by making the system as useable as possible to as many people as possible - through route re-engineering and schedule coordination or linkages to schools, employment centers, ferries, train/bus station, etc.

Fewer cars on Peninsula is a long term goal, enabled by efficient public transit, cabs, walking and biking infrastructure, and the density of downtown business and residential development. More long term goals include rail and/or trolley coming back on peninsula and higher speed rail to Boston. A train station downtown with small scale regional commuter rail may make long term sense. The city should head in the direction of more density, public transit, and bike and walking infrastructure while still accommodating required car and truck traffic, and policy and incentive considerations to this end at the local level should be on our agenda.

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

Portland housing is not affordable relative to incomes in the City. Homeownership costs are running around 30% of area median incomes, and rents are similarly high as a percentage. It is imperative that Portland maintain a diverse range of housing, from the very low to the very high end. The density of the peninsula should be build up instead of out, maximizing mixed income apartment and condominium type downtown housing opportunities. Elsewhere, we can evaluate restrictions on 'side' units such as in-law or garden apartments. We should focus on all forms of weatherization and retrofit investment to reduce the heating and energy costs of our housing stock, which are too high by any measure.

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

TIFs can be defined as “a public economic development financing program, funded by the property taxes on the incremental new value generated by a development project” (from city presentation, April 2010). TIFs are an important tool the City has available for business retention and attraction. On a case by case basis, if a development project can be shown to have both short term economic merit with local jobs, and long term value to the community through capital improvements in property investment, then a TIF can be wholly appropriate, even for an individual property or project.

A more collective application of a TIF involves capturing some portion of taxes generated in a zone for reinvestment in collective improvements in that zone. For example, the ‘Creative Portland Development and Arts TIF District’ was created to support the promotion and marketing of Portland’s creative economy. For a small amount of money derived from investment in property redevelopment in the TIF zone, there is potential for large economic development benefit. This sort of TIF should be explored for neighborhood business zones in need of collective upgrades in streetscapes, building, landscape, and other infrastructure, and for larger targeted redevelopment areas such as Bayside. Portland already has 12 TIF zones, and an assessment of their relative success would be my starting point in considering new TIF applications.

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

City government needs to do more with less, working smarter and being very cautious with resources, while investing in works that provide long term benefit.

If elected I will review what the city spends its money on line by line and department by department. I will ask basic questions and bring a small business owner’s perspective to budget review. Questions at every step will be ‘Do we really need this?’ and if yes, ‘Are we getting good value for our dollars?’. Opportunities for outsourcing or contracting for services should be considered where appropriate, with competitive procurement practices.

I do not expect there to be many places to trim the city budget further without unacceptable cuts in core services. However, if there are opportunities to consolidate back office functions between city operations, share services regionally with neighboring towns, or simply streamline current operations, I will support that sort of belt tightening. Information technology can be a driver in this effort. For example, if the public can self-serve online for more services that currently require staff time at city hall, we can both improve customer service and convenience and reduce costs.

Medium term, we can reduce our energy costs by undertaking building and fleet retrofits - paid for by their own savings in the case of some weatherization projects recently proposed.

When it comes to raising revenues, the city cannot continue to ratchet up property taxes on home owners. It is a real burden already. We need a larger business tax base, and that will only come over time with smart economic development policies and business attraction. Long term, Portland should also work with legislators in Augusta on matters of school funding and taxation to ensure we get our fair share from the State and the Federal government.

I am opposed to nickel-and-dime regressive revenue generation, such as flipping the credit card processing fee on top of excise tax payments (as city hall has done), or raising the cost of our trash bags. Pay as you go trash collection has merit and increases recycling, but the recent blue bag price hike has had unintended consequences and should be rolled back.

I see opportunity for revenue generation in our airport and port transportation infrastructure, with the airport expansion underway, and the real possibility of growth at the International Marine Terminal under its new Federal designation as part of a Marine Highway for container shipping.

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

CDBG funds come from HUD and are targeted toward restoring struggling and blighted neighborhoods through housing related projects, but eligible uses are broad and include infrastructure spending on streets, utilities/public works, and public buildings, as well as grant making to social service providers. There is now a formula-driven ranking system in Portland to guide the application and award process for these grants. I support the principle of an objective grant making system that requires applications and rewards promise, innovation and progress. I would review the current ranking and award system for flaws. I would prioritize high impact systemic improvements over spot projects on the built infrastructure spending, and innovative, change-making social service and economic development applications over the status quo.

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

Both the Old Port and Arts Districts are key pieces of the Portland downtown fabric of place. The Old Port is unique in its character, and is an attraction and a destination. It defines Portland to the outside world and to residents alike. The combination of history, mixed use activity, density, bars and restaurants, and general spectrum (from somewhat seedy to high end classy) make the Old Port one of Portland's biggest assets.

The Arts District is where I have worked for the past 10 years - the first seven at the 'foot' of it on Congress St just West of Monument Square, and the past few at the 'top' overlooking Longfellow Square. The numerous boutiques and galleries in the area seem to be growing in number and presence. MECA is an important part of this strip of Congress St and helps define the Arts District. First Friday artwalks have become a very strong event for the district, and I hope to see these trends continue.

In both districts, we need to aggressively ensure public safety, and work towards clean and inviting public spaces, accessibility, integrated housing opportunities, and public art. The city is playing an important role in retaining and improving the character of the buildings and streets, and should do everything it can to encourage investment in these zones.

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

This process seems to be generally effective as it stands. Portland's restaurant and bar scene is a vibrant one. I would be open to suggestions on this topic from those in the business and those establishments impacted or constrained by the current regulations.

I would have no problem denying a license to an establishment that demonstrably and repeatedly created a public nuisance. Almost all of our establishments do the right thing and should be free to go about their business with low interference and low costs from the city. I would consider moving the closing hour from 1 AM to 2 AM as well, which has been shown to spread out the 'last call' frenzy that can lead to overindulgence and problems.

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. In my opinion, a directly/popularly elected mayor is a clear improvement in our structure of governance. At present, we govern by consensus and pass the baton every year to a sitting Councilor to act as Mayor. A popularly elected mayor would be accountable to the entire voting population of the city, and not just a majority of sitting councilors. A directly elected mayor would provide Portland with a 'go to' person for setting a policy agenda and for representing our interests when it comes to State and Federal government issues, public-private partnership opportunities, economic development initiatives, and more.

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

Yes.