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Mayor Katz's agenda

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10/01/2000

Mayor Katz's Agenda for the next 4 Years

Some Suggestions for Consideration

1. The Willamette River (Notice I did not say Willamette and Columbia Rivers)

This is a good place to focus attention. Gil Kelley has got it right. That river is the place to marshal our resources. The Willamette River is important to Portlanders. The City ought to be spending more of its development energy and money on and along the Willamette. Why not make a commitment of dollars to the river? The City has made such a commitment to housing.

Can the Mayor step up now and commit to a sizable budget for the river (similar to the commitment made to get the funds for the freeway covers, but much greater in amount)--to be spent over the next 8 years in ways determined in the process that Gil has underway? If the Mayor commits to get the money, Gil and the other river planners will get more attention and we will get a better plan out of the process. In 4 years, the City could have made several substantial investments along the river, and we could have a solid plan of action for the 4 years following--all funded by a significant City commitment now.

2. Urban Design

I believe that we can find a way to improve urban design in Portland without resorting to more of the deadening, downer kind of regulations we have put in place. I suggest we start now on a 2-track process:

a. Track the effects of City regulations on the design of buildings over the next 4 years (the prohibitions against the snout house, for example). Use this review and analysis to propose at the end of 4 years a major expansion on such regulations, a major revamping of the regulations or a complete scrapping of them.

b. Begin immediately an effort to 'catch them doing it right.' When especially good examples of design happen, make a lot out of it. Promote the designer and the building. Get them on TV, and in the newspaper. For sure, get them on the Mayor's Forum and other visual media. Get the Council to propose some of their favorites, and make a lot out of them, as well. In short, let's find the good stuff that is happening; promote it and reward it. The objective is not just to give the designers and owners a pat on the back, it is also to establish a standard of design for those who make up the demand for buildings: buyers, realtors,

investors, etc. If the market demands good design, the builders will build good design. We can more effectively help set the standard for good design by pointing out what we like, than by prohibiting what we don't like. Obviously, this is not all that needs to be done (and the 4-year analysis in the first track above can inform us better about that). But this approach to 'catch them doing it right' is surely as productive as our current approach to 'keep them from doing it wrong.'

A good dose of the bully pulpit I think can help us achieve that illusive quality of good design. I like the Mayor's reminders after each episode of the Mayor's Forum and in other appearances around town: reach out and touch some one and help those in need; celebrate diversity; do good . . . etc. These are gentle reminders to us all. We can do better. We should. I think these reminders can do as much, if not more, than the warnings we get that we shouldn't do this or that . . .

3. Major League Sports Franchise:

I think we need another major league sports franchise in the City. The Mayor's tireless efforts didn't realize a major league baseball franchise. But I hope she keeps trying.

4. Density or Livability?

I fear that we are losing a lot of support for the tough decisions we need to make to maintain our livability as we grow and change--because we have chosen to use density as a proxy for livability. Density is not an end; it is at best a means, and a blunt instrument at that. Surely higher densities (really, shorter pipes and narrow streets) can reduce the costs of infrastructure. And other efficiencies can be realized as well. But the real increase in density is already taking place--in the suburban areas where a significant reduction in density can take place without undue stress on the population.

At the same time that we push higher densities, we forget about the other dimensions of livability: opportunity, challenge, growth in understanding and community, etc.

We need to get off our single-minded devotion to higher densities and get back to the goal of livability. Thousand Friends and others can help by turning from regulation of the rural areas to livability in our urban areas. Metro can help by recognizing density as a means and not an end. The Mayor can help by defining our commitment to the region as one of becoming a more livable city, not one of becoming a denser city.

Investment in the City:

Get a Portland map, and chart where Portland has spent its public money over the last 30 years. Ask yourself why.