Growing Wisely in Vancouver, Washington: An interview with Mayor Anne McEnerny-Ogle

Elizabeth Morehead
Portland State University

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How has Vancouver changed since you were first elected to City Council in 2014?

One noticeably big change is the increase in people experiencing homelessness. Prior to 2014, it wasn’t on our radar the way it is now. A large number of people started to lose their housing and at the same time our city began experiencing a very low vacancy rate, which only exacerbated the problem. Suddenly we were asking, what is homelessness and how do we deal with this? An increase in tent camping, the need for homeless shelters and day centers, tiny houses, accessory dwelling units—these are all issues we never faced before. We were very good at providing police, fire, streets, sidewalks, sewer, water, and parks services, but didn’t know very much about homeless services. Suddenly we realized that we had to jump in and start working on this.

We put together an Affordable Housing Task Force who made a series of recommendations to council to help address homelessness and affordable housing issues. One of their recommendations was to place an Affordable Housing Fund measure on the ballot. And in November 2016, the voters passed it. The Affordable Housing Fund will provide $6 million a year for seven years to be used to help address affordable housing and homelessness issues in our city.

Prior to 2014, our thinking had been that the county organization was solely responsible for homelessness issues in our area, but since then there has been a sea change of thought about our role in affordable housing and homelessness, and we’re still working on it. It’s not an easy problem and we’re going to need the help of our community partners to help us address it. It’s a huge issue.
LM: The affordable housing bond measure has gone into development, and new buildings are under construction, is that right?

AMO: Yes, we’re excited about that. The affordable housing fund includes funding for buying, building, and preserving low-income rental housing and preventing homelessness through rental assistance and housing services. In 2017, $4.4 million was awarded to local housing agencies for 100 affordable housing units and several housing rehab projects.

In 2015, we revised the city’s camping ordinance to allow overnight camping on most publicly-owned property, excluding parks. But what we want is to get all the necessary services in place that will help people with the assistance they need to transition into permanent housing. We have been using affordable housing funds to help get people into housing, and we will be considering the allocation of funds for homeless facilities this summer. I heard that Mayor Ted Wheeler made an announcement in his State of the City address that they have a new homeless shelter coming. We’ll see if we can do something similar here.

LM: I’ve read about Vancouver’s new accessory-dwelling unit (ADU) ordinance. Is that something that you expect people to embrace?

AMO: Oh yes. The recent ADU ordinance minimized restrictions to keep costs down. People now have the ability to put one ADU on their property, attached or detached, in the basement or above the garage. They don’t need onsite parking. We revised the owner-occupancy piece. More and more people are considering ADUs. My hope is that ADUs stay in the affordable housing category, that they will be used for family members or rented at an affordable price, and won’t become an Airbnb. I’m hoping that we don’t have to write an ordinance that requires that ADUs be used only for residential purposes. Fees were reduced to encourage people to increase density and create affordable housing opportunities, not to provide income opportunities. The county is now looking at ADUs, too.

LM: You also mentioned tiny homes. Is that something you anticipate developing in Vancouver?

AMO: We’ve had a few nonprofit developers approach us about building tiny home villages and we’ll continue working with them. We require the same infrastructure for tiny homes as for other homes, like sewer, water, everything underground. And tiny homes must sit on a foundation, not on wheels and axles. You could use that as an ADU in your backyard, but it still needs the infrastructure. We have a business in Vancouver called Blokable. They make rectangular-shaped, steel modular units that can be used for housing, which could be very beneficial for affordable housing developments.

LM: What are all the different ways that we can provide housing for people for different periods of time, or in different situations? And what is the cost difference?

AMO: The market phased out boarding-houses years ago, but now is the market ready to bring back single-room occupancy, where you share bathrooms, showers, and laundry space? And mobile home parks, maybe we also need to rethink mobile home parks in our community. A developer here asked if they could build apartments that were only 600 square feet. It was kind of shocking because that seemed much too small. Then you go to Ikea and you say, oh, it’s not too small. But it was a sea change for us to think about what we allow and what we encourage. I think more developers are looking at how to build housing that’s affordable, because $1,500 a month rent is not affordable for two people and $1,000 is not affordable for one person. People are struggling.

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LM: The templates I’ve seen for those are still very expensive, boutique, and they’re for young professionals. I don’t know if it’s the finances that aren’t penciling in, or people just haven’t quite made it there yet. It will be interesting to see what happens.

AMO: It will be. I’ve also heard that purpose-built, modular units are still very expensive. The land is another big expense. Out in the rural areas you might find land, but then you have the transportation and parking challenges.

LM: It sounds like with all the new development downtown that’s only going to get worse.

AMO: More and more people are living in, working in, and visiting our city; they like all the amenities that an urban environment provides, and we’ll see an even greater influx of people once our new waterfront development opens. We will continue to encourage diverse housing and transportation options in our future economic and community development planning. We are also sensitive to the issues surrounding redevelopment of neighborhoods, we don’t want people being displaced or pushed out of their homes because they can’t afford to live there anymore.

LM: Any suggestions?

AMO: The city recently applied for the new Opportunity Zones Program which is a federal program designed to incentivize new business investments in underserved communities. But we’ll have to look at any future investments through this program very carefully so that we’re not accepting great opportunities for our benefit that should be for the benefit of those that are still there.

LM: I have a question about the waterfront development, but then also all the development that’s been happening downtown. I’ve been reading about all the new building permits that have been issued….

AMO: In the past year, we’ve issued nearly 2,000 building permits citywide.

LM: And how many new restaurants are there downtown?

AMO: Forty-eight new eating or drinking establishments have opened just in downtown Vancouver in the past five years.

LM: That is remarkable.

AMO: I know! It’s very exciting.

LM: I was wondering how this will change the role that Vancouver plays in the region, and the way that people see the city.

AMO: We are the second largest city in the Vancouver-Portland metropolitan area with a population of approximately 183,000 people. About 3,000 new people are moving to Vancouver every year. Folks are coming here
for a number of reasons. We have temperate weather, access to recreation, great restaurants, brew pubs and coffee shops, parks and trails, lots of trees and fresh air. Families feel comfortable here and it’s a great place to raise children. And with the opening of the waterfront development, even more people will be coming here to visit our new waterfront park and the restaurants that will open there. Managing future growth has to be done carefully. We’re balancing keeping our small town feel and all that people love about Vancouver, while also becoming a vibrant, urbanized city.

These are interesting times. We used to be so dependent on the federal government for lots of things. Now, not so much. Since 2014, when I joined city council, I think our council has realized that if we’re going to get something done, we need to take care of it ourselves. We recently implemented new revenue sources as part of a streets funding initiative to improve our streets.

**LM:** I read about that. As a resident of Portland, I was very envious of the street maintenance project that’s being launched.

**AMO:** This summer, we’ll be putting about $10.5 million into repaving and preserving streets in nearly half of Vancouver’s neighborhoods. Our streets were failing fast and the dollars we had couldn’t keep pace. State and federal agencies weren’t going to fill that gap for us. We needed to do it ourselves, so we developed a long-term streets funding strategy to address pavement conditions, as well as improve mobility and upgrade major corridors. We prioritize every one of our projects, nail down the costs, and report back to the community each year on how much money we collect and where it’s spent. It’s working. Last year, 2017, was the largest on record for summer pavement work. This year will beat that. And we are gaining the critical local leverage we need to get grants for the major projects our community needs. In addition, last year we adopted a Complete Streets Policy which will guide future improvements such as more pedestrian and bike-friendly roads.
Our public sewer and water are ratepayer-funded city-owned-and-operated utilities. They pay for themselves. We don’t like debt. In recent years, we’ve made it a policy to pay as we go and avoid debt wherever possible. As any remaining utility bonds are paid off, the funds we had used for debt go back into improving utilities.

This council has diverse backgrounds and lots of strength. They have very strong voices. They are looking for innovative ideas on how to solve our problems.

LM: Vancouver city government has a reputation as being more efficient and working better than some of the other cities in the region. What advice would you give to other local jurisdictions?

AMO: I look at our sister cities on this side of the river and I think we’re doing well. It’s all about teamwork and collaboration.

Helping colleagues work together is not easy, and I haven’t nailed it all down completely. But it goes back to creating a level of trust. Talk to me about your concern, councilor. Tell us what you are finding. I find our dinnertime together is helpful. New councilors bring in ideas, or they’ve been off to a conference, listening to what’s going on in the rest of the world. Go and see what Durham or Eugene or Philadelphia is doing, come back and share what you’ve learned. Your colleagues are a rich resource. When you’re collaborating with and trusting each other, it’s easy to vote in support of someone’s idea. We have a great council, very diverse, young and old, parents, not parents, grandparents, different jobs. What I think it comes down to is this: is the community your focus, can I trust you, and can we work together on these issues for the good of our community?

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