

John Russell

I feel like a fish out of water: the public policy issues that I care about aren't even being discussed. The issues that I care about can be loosely described as "things one can see."

For example, on a national level, I'd like to see us develop a system of high-speed rail projects in the dozen corridors in which such a train can beat an airplane. Republicans hate the idea because (1) it's government in action and (2) it's for the public. Democrats ignore it. Even more mundane infrastructure projects are ignored. The Trump administration's plans for spending on infrastructure has little Federal money and instead relies on state spending, which ain't going to happen. The result is a lack of national pride. There's no sense that we're building toward a better future (as opposed to gnashing our teeth about social issues like immigration).

For the City of Portland the situation is similar. Both Hales and Wheeler have stated three priorities: homelessness, affordable housing and police relations. Those issues are terribly important, no doubt, but the common threads among them are (1) they are insoluble, and (2) they're unmeasurable. As a result, there's no sense of civic pride, no sense that Portland is moving ahead, like it used to when it traded Federal highway money for the beginning of light rail, when it pioneered streetcars, when it converted a parking lot into Pioneer Square, when it converted three dilapidated blocks into Pioneer Place. The result is a lack of pride in our City, of a sense that we're building toward a better future (as opposed to gnashing our teeth about social issues like homelessness, affordable housing and police relations).

Here are some issues that I'd like to see the City tackle:

1 I'd like the City to plan for the elimination of Interstate 5 on the surface along the Willamette waterfront, along with the replacement of the Marquam Bridge, so that the Central Eastside can connect with the River like the elimination of Harbor Drive and the creation of Tom McCall Waterfront Park accomplished for the west side of the River.

2 I'd like to see taxes levied on large asphalt parking lots (principally Hayden Island, Cascade Station, Mall 205 and the Airport) with the funds used for paving the dirt roads inside the City limits in far eastern Portland.

3 I'd like to see the City require the owners of the bridges on the Willamette and the Columbia (the Federal government, the State, the County and Burlington Northern) to demonstrate in public hearings the seismic capabilities of their bridges. In the event of a massive earthquake the only way that a vehicle could get across the Willamette is the Sellwood Bridge, and the Columbia is probably the Dalles Dam. As a result our economy would be devastated, to a far greater degree than either San Francisco or Anchorage in their earthquakes.

4 I'd like to see the City take a lead in the design of a Columbia Crossing.

5 I'd like the City to move forward on the redesign of the Keller Auditorium that a group of us has put forward.

6 I'd like the City to change the management of complex parks to the model of Manhattan (think Central Park and Bryant Square), in which adjoining property owners pay for and manage the parks in partnership with the City.

7 I'd like the City to take a more active role in promoting the Southwest Corridor light rail project.

8 I'd like the Planning Commission to once again be the public body in which bold ideas are surfaced and vetted. The City Council hearings process is a joke (mid-week, mid-day in downtown). When I was on the Planning Commission we held hearings wherever and whenever we could get the most folks to attend.

9 I'd like the circular ramps of the west end of the Morrison Bridge eliminated, freeing up three blocks that front on Waterfront Park.

10 I'd like the City to declare that no asphalt parking should be allowed on Naito Parkway or along any Central City light rail line.

I've spoken about these issues several times with both Wheeler and his prior chief of staff. All I've gotten is "deer in the headlights" looks. It's like I'm speaking a foreign language, which in a sense I am. These are not issues that Wheeler cares about, and maybe more importantly they're not issues that the electorate cares about. What's important to recognize is that the accomplishments of the Goldschmidt and the Katz eras were not the result of groundswells of public opinion, rather they were the convictions of Goldschmidt and Katz and their administrations. Goldschmidt and Katz were leaders.

On a related but separate topic, I've been a student of leadership. Karl Jung defines leadership (defined as what to do, what actions to take) in both a positive and negative sense. The positive is "I've got an idea. What do you think?" The negative is "here's what I insist we do." There's third way, which is a lack of leadership: "what do you folks think?" Elected officials get lots of positive feedback for that sort of lack of leadership. They're called consensus builders. Clearly consensus is essential for coming to a conclusion -- but about what? Without a suggestion to debate, chaos is the result. An example comes to mind: Charlie Hales convened a group of some three dozen stakeholders to debate the elimination of the Morrison Bridge ramps. Every group that had a say was there (ODOT, the County, PBOT) but Charlie Hales NEVER EXPRESSED HIS OWN OPINION! Guess what: the status quo prevailed.

We've had a succession of consensus building mayors from Potter to Adams to Hales and now to Wheeler. Only Goldschmidt and Katz in my memory left no doubt of their opinions about what should be done. The result is that stuff got done.

I've been more than an observer of City issues. I've been a participant. I've served on the Landmarks Commission and the Planning Commission. I've chaired the Development Commission and the Mayor's Business Roundtable and the Friends of Portland Parks.

And I've never been more discouraged. People are coming here because of actions taken in the now-distant past. Other cities are taking charge of their futures (Seattle's massive bond issue for transportation, for example), and we're not. We're not even debating it. We're trying to solve the insoluble issues like homeless, affordable housing and police relations instead. We can and ought to both deal with the present and plan for the future. We can do both, but we're not.