

Street Roots weighs in on Sidewalk Management Plan

October 16, 2009 · 2 Comments

Editorial in the current edition of Street Roots (Oct. 16)

Opportunities lie ahead to build up, not down

There are many reasons to have a doom-and-gloom attitude about the economy and homelessness in Portland. We know businesses are hurting. People are hurting. Workers are feeling the brunt of layoffs and uncertainty heading into the holiday season. There are bills to pay and hungry mouths to feed. That comforting sense of security has long since vanished.

Right alongside all those uncertainties are people who sleep in our doorways, under our bridges and along makeshift paths stretched across our city. It all signals a weary and unforgiving winter ahead.

On the street, the buzz is about the new Sidewalk Management Plan. Street Roots has been getting calls from supporters, organizers, politicians and foundations on what our thoughts are on the Sidewalk Management Plan. So, what do we think?

We think a real opportunity exists to change the way Portland messages and works for with individuals on the streets.

On the front end, the plan is fantastic and builds a base for ongoing support for services, such as public restrooms, that are essential not just for people experiencing poverty, but all Portlanders. But concerning homelessness on our sidewalks and neighborhood corners, there are two ways the city can go: the familiar route of antagonism, or a new path of cooperation.

The city could opt for an anti-panhandling campaign that will fire up the engines of advocates for people on the streets and groups such as the ACLU. If the city goes for the anti-panhandling strategy, the plan risks being polarizing and falling into patterns that have failed many times before in cities across the U.S. And at the end of the day, it doesn't get to heart of the problem – which isn't panhandling per se, so much as it aggressive behavior.

Or the city could choose, through a public education campaign, to engage people on the streets through outreach from social-service agencies and support from the broader community.

What if the general community was asked to give to services and support a larger

spectrum of goals set out to curb the problem without saying don't give to panhandlers? In the end, it's not the city's responsibility to direct or discourage any particular form of individual charity, but it is entirely appropriate for the city to spread the word on how people can plug in to and support the great programs Portland offers. Services that exist for people experiencing homelessness are strained, just like small and large businesses in this economy, and that strain ripples across the streets.

Why not beef the outreach up and engage people into getting into housing and accessing services? For those who choose to step over the line and commit aggressive acts, there are tools for addressing that behavior. Not everyone is kind, housed or homeless. There has to be personal accountability on the streets and it's that simple. Why not educate people on the streets to show kindness and respect when facing adversity and survival? Street Roots does it every day with its vendor program, and it works.

If we embrace the approach of what we can do, instead of what we can't, we might not have to read about police stings and anti-panhandling campaigns anymore. And instead of seeing negative stereotypes reinforced in the daily headlines, we might get some good news about a city that chooses to stand up together, instead of tearing one another down.