

FY 2017 Municipal Operating Budget Comments
Mayor Ethan K. Strimling
April 25, 2016

I FIRST WANT TO START OUT BY THANKING THE CITY MANAGER AND HIS STAFF FOR THEIR WORK ON ASSEMBLING THEIR FY 2017 BUDGET RECOMMENDATIONS. AS THE CITY MANAGER PRESENTED HIS BUDGET, HE STATED THAT THE PROCESS THIS YEAR INCORPORATED THE INPUT OF MANY FRONT LINE WORKERS. OUR HARD WORKING CITY EMPLOYEES HAVE FIRSHTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT IT TAKES TO DO THEIR JOBS AND DO IT IN A WAY THAT SERVES THE PUBLIC EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY. I APPLAUD THIS APPROACH.

I ALSO WANT TO THANK MY COLLEAGUES ON THE COUNCIL'S FINANCE COMMITTEE FOR THEIR RECOMMENDATION ON THIS BUDGET. A SUCCESSFUL BUDGET PROCESS HINGES ON THE DUE DILIGENCE OF THOSE OF US WHO HAVE BEEN ELECTED TO REPRESENT THE NEARLY 70,000 RESIDENTS OF PORTLAND. IN THE COMING WEEKS, IT'S EVEN MORE CRITICAL TO CONTINUE THAT WORK OF ASKING QUESTIONS AND REFLECTING ON FEEDBACK AS WE REACH OUR FINAL VOTE ON WHAT IS A VERY IMPACTFUL BUDGET PROPOSAL BY THE CITY MANAGER.

FINALLY AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, I WANT TO SHOW MY APPRECIATION FOR THE LETTERS, EMAILS AND PHONE CALLS I'VE RECEIVED AS WELL AS THE MEETINGS I'VE HAD THE PRIVILEGE TO HOLD WITH SO MANY OF OUR ENGAGED RESIDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS. I'VE BEEN BOTH PROUD OF, AND HUMBLLED BY, THE THOUGHTFUL CONCERN OF SO MANY PORTLANDERS. YOUR ENGAGEMENT ON THESE BUDGET ISSUES

SHOWS HOW IMPORTANT THIS PROCESS IS TO YOU - AND ALSO REAFFIRMS TO ME HOW IMPORTANT YOU ARE TO THIS PROCESS.

AS THE CITY MANAGER OUTLINED IN HIS PRESENTATION, THIS BUDGET MAKES A NUMBER OF POLICY DECISIONS THAT HAVE THE EFFECT OF SHIFTING CITY FUNCTIONS BACK TOWARD, AS HE DESCRIBED IT, "THE BASICS OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT." BASICS LIKE FIXING BROKEN SIDEWALKS, PAVING CRACKED ROADS, AND BUILDING A MORE EFFICIENT PERMITTING PROCESS FOR DEVELOPMENT. TO ACHIEVE THAT, THIS PROPOSED BUDGET WILL REDIRECT A MILLION AND A HALF DOLLARS OF NEW SPENDING TOWARD THESE EFFORTS, INCLUDING ADDING ALMOST TWENTY NEW GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES TO THE DEPARTMENTS THAT OVERSEE THESE SERVICES. NO DOUBT, THIS INVESTMENT WILL PAY DIVIDENDS DOWN THE ROAD IN OUR CIVIC PRIDE AS OUR STREETS ARE CLEANER, DEVELOPMENT DELAYS ARE REDUCED, POTHOLES GET FILLED MORE QUICKLY AND THE ROADS WE DRIVE ARE SMOOTHER.

I COMMEND THE CITY MANAGER FOR HEARING THE COUNCIL ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE EFFICIENT DELIVERY OF SERVICES. GOVERNMENT HAS AN INSTRUMENTAL ROLE IN THESE KINDS OF INVESTMENTS.

HOWEVER TO ACCOMPLISH THIS INVESTMENT AND BECAUSE ALL DECISIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES, DIFFICULT CHOICES HAD TO BE MADE. THAT'S THE FUNDAMENTAL DILEMMA IN BUDGETING WITHOUT THE LUXURY OF UNLIMITED DOLLARS. WHEN WE CHOOSE TO SPEND

INCREASED REVENUE SOMEWHERE, WE ARE ALSO CHOOSING NOT TO SPEND IT SOMEWHERE ELSE. AND WHEN WE CHOOSE TO CUT ONE PROGRAM IN A CITY, WE ARE ALSO OFTEN CHOOSING TO SPARE OR INCREASE ANOTHER. IN BOTH DECISIONS, OUR POLICY PRIORITIES ARE REFLECTED IN THAT CHOICE AND IN THE OUTCOMES WE CAN EXPECT.

SO WHAT ARE THE CHOICES IN THIS BUDGET? WHAT SACRIFICES ARE BEING ASKED OF OUR RESIDENTS AND OUR CITY?

IF ADOPTED AS CURRENTLY PROPOSED, THIS BUDGET'S PLAN TO REALIGN MUNICIPAL FUNCTIONS WILL BE FUELLED IN PART BY A CONSCIOUS DECISION FOR THE CITY TO RETREAT FROM THE PROMINENT ROLE IT ONCE PLAYED IN THE PROVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH. IN CONTRAST TO THE NEARLY TWENTY NEW POSITIONS I MENTIONED EARLIER THAT ARE FOCUSED ON PERMITTING, PAVING AND POTHOLES, THIS BUDGET PROPOSES CUTTING 35 POSITIONS IN OUR PUBLIC HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION. THESE CUTS, IN PART, WILL END UP ELIMINATING CITY-LED DIRECT MEDICAL SERVICE TO OUR MOST VULNERABLE NEIGHBORS, DRUG EDUCATION AND TREATMENT FOR OUR RESIDENTS, AND ENFORCEMENT METHODS THAT KEEP CIGARETTES OUT OF THE HANDS OF OUR CHILDREN.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE POSSIBLE CUTS ON OUR CITY TELL A SOBERING STORY OF HOW OUR CITY COULD BE IMPACTED.

IN THE AREA OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND PREVENTION, THE RESULT OF THE CUTS IN THIS BUDGET, ACCORDING TO THE NUMBERS GIVEN TO

THE COUNCIL, WILL MEAN: 2,700 RESIDENTS WILL LOSE ACCESS TO OUR OPIATE-RELATED OVERDOSE PREVENTION PROGRAM. 7,500 PARENTS WILL LOSE ACCESS TO RESOURCES TO HELP THEM KEEP THEIR KIDS FROM USING MARIJUANA. AND 1,000 COMMUNITY MEMBERS WILL LOSE ACCESS TO EDUCATION REGARDING THE SAFE STORAGE AND DISPOSAL OF PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION.

IN THE MIDDLE OF A SURGE IN OPIATE USE, INCREASED ABUSE OF PRESCRIPTION DRUGS AND A PROLIFERATION OF MARIJUANA USE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE; THIS BUDGET ELIMINATES PROGRAMS KNOWN TO SPECIFICALLY COUNTER THIS EPIDEMIC.

AND JUST AS THE COUNCIL DEBATES RAISING THE AGE TO PURCHASE CIGARETTES, WE MAY BE ON THE VERGE OF HAMSTRINGING OUR ABILITY TO ENFORCE SUCH A LAW. BECAUSE OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF THIS BUDGET, WE WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO WORK WITH OVER 100 RETAILERS TO PREVENT UNDERAGE SALES OF TOBACCO.

IN THE AREAS OF OBESITY, NUTRITION AND MINORITY HEALTH, VITAL PROGRAMS WILL ALSO SUFFER: TWENTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND WORKSITES WILL NO LONGER HAVE SUPPORT TO IMPLEMENT WELLNESS POLICIES FOR OUR KIDS. AND ALMOST 200 PEOPLE IN POVERTY WILL LOSE SERVICES THAT CONNECT THEM WITH HEALTHCARE AND SOCIAL SERVICES, INSURANCE COVERAGE, HOUSING, FOOD, AND ELDER CARE.

THE CITY MANAGER HAS RIGHTLY STATED THAT STATE FUNDING FOR THE ABOVE PROGRAMS HAS BEEN CUT. AND I AGREE THAT THE LOSS OF STATE FUNDING PRESENTS A DIFFICULT CHALLENGE. BUT IN PAST BUDGETS, WHEN WE DECIDED A PROGRAM WAS IMPORTANT ENOUGH, WE HAVE CHOSEN TO UTILIZE CITY FUNDS TO BACKFILL WHERE A LOSS IN GRANTS OCCURS. AND THAT TREND CONTINUES IN THE PROPOSED BUDGET BEFORE US. WE ARE KEEPING 12 HIGHLY SKILLED FIREFIGHTERS IN OUR FORCE, DESPITE THE LOSS OF A HALF MILLION DOLLAR GRANT FROM THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. THIS IS A DECISION I SUPPORT AND IS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW WE CAN FIND THE MONEY WHEN WE CONSIDER IT IMPORTANT ENOUGH. IN ESSENCE, DOES CHOOSING PUBLIC WORKS OVER PREVENTATIVE HEALTH REFLECT OUR SHARED VALUES?

AND THEN, OF COURSE, THERE IS THE CLOSING AND TRANSFERRING OF SERVICES FROM THE CITY RUN INDIA STREET CLINIC. IN THIS AREA, MY CONCERNS ARE LESS ABOUT WHETHER ANOTHER AGENCY COULD BE AS OR MORE EFFECTIVE IN ADMINISTERING THESE SERVICES. IN FACT, I AGREE WITH MANY OF THE STAFF AT INDIA STREET THAT THE LACK OF ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORDS AND THEIR COSTLY ANTIQUATED BILLING SYSTEM HAMPERS THEIR ABILITY TO SERVE THEIR CLIENTS AS WELL AS THEY WOULD LIKE. FINDING A PARTNER OR FISCAL AGENT IS VITAL TO THEIR LONG TERM HEALTH.

BUT WHAT I AM CONCERNED ABOUT IS WHETHER WE HAVE BUILT AN ADEQUATE PLAN, WITH ADEQUATE TIME, TO GUARANTEE THAT THE TRANSFER WILL BE SUCCESSFUL. DO WE HAVE CLEAR AND BROAD

ENOUGH METRICS TO MEASURE SUCCESS? AND IS THERE IS AN EXIT STRATEGY, IF IT TURNS OUT THIS WAS THE WRONG DIRECTION? UNFORTUNATELY, IN THE INSTANCE OF TRANSFERRING THOUSANDS OF PATIENTS FROM OUR CLINIC TO PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH, TO DATE WE HAVE BEEN PRESENTED WITH MERELY AN OUTLINE WHICH ONLY INDICATES THAT THE ENTIRE PROCESS WILL BE COMPLETED WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR.

PLEASE MAKE NO MISTAKE, I DO NOT QUESTION THE CAPABILITY OF THE STAFF AND LEADERSHIP AT PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH. IN FACT, I AM PROUD TO STATE THAT I MYSELF AM A PATIENT THERE AND CAN ATTEST TO THE CARE I HAVE RECEIVED. ADDITIONALLY, I HAVE READ THEIR RECENT AUDITS AND, HAVING RUN A NOT-FOR-PROFIT FOR ALMOST 20 YEARS, I CAN TELL YOU PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH'S RESULTS ARE EXEMPLARY.

BUT THE QUESTION BEFORE THIS BODY IS ONE OF TIMING, DUE DILIGENCE AND ENSURING WE GET THIS RIGHT ON THE FIRST TRY. BECAUSE, AS THE PRESS HERALD RECENTLY EDITORIALIZED, "IF THE CITY DOESN'T GET THIS RIGHT, PEOPLE WILL DIE." AND WHILE I AM GLAD THE TIMELINE FOR SOME OF THESE SERVICES HAS BEEN ADJUSTED, THE QUESTIONS ON PROCESS, ACCOUNTABILITY AND WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE REMAIN OUTSTANDING.

SO, BEFORE I CAN BE COMFORTABLE WITH THE TRANSFER OF SERVICES FROM INDIA STREET TO PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH,

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT QUESTIONS THAT WE AS A COUNCIL, AND AS A COMMUNITY, MUST HAVE ANSWERED:

1. THE NEEDLE EXCHANGE PROGRAM CURRENTLY SERVES NEARLY 1,000 ENROLLEES, AND THAT NUMBER IS GROWING. UNFORTUNATELY, WE DO NOT YET KNOW WHERE THAT PROGRAM WILL BE LOCATED. MY COLLEAGUES ON THE FINANCE COMMITTEE RAISED SOME CRITICAL POINTS DURING THIS BUDGET PROCESS ABOUT THE LOGISTICS OF SITING THESE SERVICES AT EXISTING PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH LOCATIONS: ONE IS ACROSS THE STREET FROM A MIDDLE SCHOOL AND ANOTHER IS NEXT DOOR TO A POLICE STATION. OBVIOUSLY, NEITHER OF THESE LOCATIONS IS APPROPRIATE AND WE NEED MORE DETAILS BEFORE WE MOVE FORWARD.

2. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT THE RYAN WHITE GRANT, WHICH PROVIDES HIV RELATED SERVICES TO HUNDREDS OF PATIENTS, CAN BE TRANSFERRED TO PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH. BUT THEN WE HEARD WE WEREN'T SURE IF IT COULD BE TRANSFERRED AND THAT PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH MAY NEED TO APPLY FOR IT COMPETITIVELY. BUT THEN WE WERE TOLD THAT WE ARE ONLY "REASONABLY SURE" THAT THEY'LL GET THE GRANT IF THEY APPLY. HOW DO WE ENSURE THAT THESE SERVICES WILL BE ABLE TO CONTINUE, UNINTERRUPTED, REGARDLESS OF THE GYMNASTICS SURROUNDING RETAINING THAT GRANT? AND WHAT HAPPENS IF WE ARE WRONG AND PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH IS UNABLE TO SECURE THE GRANT WHEN THEY APPLY? HOW DO WE ENSURE, THAT

FIVE YEARS FROM NOW, WHEN WE AS A CITY ARE NO LONGER IN CONTROL, THAT THESE SERVICES WILL STILL BE PROVIDED?

3. WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT A “WARM HAND-OFF” WILL TAKE PLACE WITH THE CURRENT CLIENTS AT INDIA STREET. WE MUST KEEP IN MIND THAT THESE CLIENTS HAVE BUILT A ROUTINE AND HAVE CULTIVATED A TRUSTING RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR CAREGIVERS. IN ADDITION, ALL OF US KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO CHANGE HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS AND NAVIGATE A NEW HEALTH CARE SYSTEM. IN THIS CASE, WE MUST BE EVEN MORE MINDFUL THAT OUR NEIGHBORS WHO RECEIVE SERVICES AT INDIA STREET ARE OFTEN FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES, FIGHTING ADDICTION AND FIGHTING TO STAY BARELY ON THE MARGINS OF OUR SOCIETY. SO A “WARM HAND-OFF” NEEDS TO TAKE AS MUCH TIME AS NECESSARY TO ENSURE NO ONE FALLS THROUGH THE CRACKS DUE TO OUR LACK OF PLANNING. IF NOT, WE WILL FORCE THOSE PATIENTS TO GIVE UP ON THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM AND ENDANGER THEIR LIVES AND OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY.

4. WE MUST KNOW HOW THE ADMINISTRATION IS GOING TO WORK WITH PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE HUNDREDS OF PATIENTS WHO PUT A PREMIUM ON ANONYMITY WHEN IT COMES TO STD TESTING. WE’VE BEEN TOLD BY HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS THAT PEOPLE COME TO INDIA STREET BECAUSE THEY CAN COME AND GO WITHOUT ANYONE KNOWING WHO THEY ARE OR WHETHER THEY EVEN WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR. MANY CLIENTS DO NOT GO TO THEIR PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIAN FOR STD TESTING

BECAUSE OF THE STIGMA INVOLVED. BUT THEY DO GO TO INDIA STREET. AS WE TRANSITION TO A NEW FACILITY, WILL WE BE ABLE TO GUARANTEE THAT ANONYMITY, COMFORT AND CONTINUITY? IF SO, EXACTLY HOW?

AND IN THE END, THE FIFTH AND MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION IS ONE THAT ENCOMPASSES ALL THE OTHERS PRECEEDING IT. WHAT ARE THE SPECIFICS ON THE INDIA STREET/PORTLAND COMMUNITY HEALTH TRANSITION PLAN? AS COUNCILORS CHARGED WITH THE HEALTH OF OUR COMMUNITY, WE WOULD NOT BE DOING OUR JOB IF WE DIDN'T ASK FOR, RECEIVE AND REVIEW A WELL-MARKED ROADMAP WITH OUTCOMES AND EXPECTATIONS PRIOR TO TAKING A FINAL VOTE.

LET US THINK BACK ONLY A LITTLE OVER A MONTH AGO WHEN WE VOTED ON THE CITY MANAGER'S PLAN TO CONSOLIDATE AND MODERNIZE THE PLANNING AND PERMITTING PROCESS. WE WERE PROVIDED A WELL-DEVELOPED STAFFING PLAN, A CLEAR FUNDING STRUCTURE, THE TIMING OF IMPLEMENTATION AND A DEFINITIVE SET OF METRICS FOR SUCCESS. WE WERE GIVEN A FULLY FLESHED-OUT PLAN WITH PLENTY OF TIME TO ANALYZE IT. THE CITY MANAGER'S APPROACH TO THAT ISSUE SHOULD BE VIEWED BY ALL OF US AS A MODEL ON HOW TO NOT ONLY IMPROVE GOVERNMENT SERVICES, BUT ON HOW TO DO IT IN A WAY THAT DOTTED ALL OF THE I'S AND CROSSED ALL OF THE T'S WELL AHEAD OF THE TIME FOR THIS BODY TO ACT. IT'S THE WAY SUCH GOVERNMENT DECISIONS SHOULD BE MADE.

BEFORE I CLOSE, I ALSO WANT TO TAKE A MINUTE TO TALK ABOUT SCHOOLS. I WANT TO THANK THE SCHOOL BOARD AND THE ACTING SUPERINTENDENT FOR THEIR THOUGHTFUL APPROACH TO THIS YEAR'S PUBLIC SCHOOL BUDGET. WHILE WE AS A GOVERNING BODY CANNOT MAKE SPECIFIC PRESCRIPTIVE CHANGES TO THE SCHOOL BUDGET, WE CAN CHOOSE WHERE WE WANT TO ENCOURAGE EMPHASIS AND PROVIDE THE SCHOOL BOARD WITH GUIDANCE ON OUR SHARED PRIORITIES. PRIORITIES SUCH AS OUR PUSH TOWARDS UNIVERSAL PRE-K AND SAFE SCHOOLS. AND WHILE NOT A PART OF THIS BUDGET PROCESS, WE AS A COUNCIL WILL SOON HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW OUR RESOLVE FOR MAKING OUR SCHOOLS THE EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL CENTERS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES BY SUPPORTING SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS TO LONGFELLOW, LYSETH, PRESUMPCOT AND REICHE.

IN CLOSING, THE COUNCIL ACTION ON THIS BUDGET GIVES US AN IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITY TO WEIGH IN ON THE DIRECTION THIS CITY WILL TAKE IN THE FUTURE. TO A WELL-FUNCTIONING CITY, PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE IS NO DOUBT IMPORTANT. AND THOSE WHO LIVE, WORK, PLAY AND PRAY IN OUR CITY WILL BE POSITIVELY AFFECTED BY AN INCREASED FOCUS ON THOSE CITY SERVICES. THE CHALLENGE IS WHETHER OR NOT WE HAVE STRUCK A BALANCE WITH OUR HUMAN SERVICE NEEDS.

IT IS INCUMBENT UPON US AS ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES OF THE RESIDENTS OF PORTLAND TO MAKE THE POLICY DECISIONS ON WHAT EXACTLY WE WANT CORE GOVERNMENT FUNCTIONS TO BE. WE HAVE

THREE WEEKS. THAT'S NOT A LOT OF TIME FOR THE QUESTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN RAISED TO BE ADDRESSED IN THE DETAIL THEY REQUIRE. BUT THESE QUESTIONS MUST BE ANSWERED ADEQUATELY FOR ME TO VOTE IN THE AFFIRMATIVE ON THE PROPOSAL BEFORE US.

IN THE END IT COMES DOWN TO WHETHER WE AS A GOVERNMENT ARE SERVING PEOPLE OR PAVEMENT, OR WHETHER, AS I BELIEVE, WE CAN SERVE BOTH.