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Summary:

Portland-area politicians have become so consumed by their Edifice Complex that they have failed to read the room. In the middle of a pandemic and recession and with several new tax measures on the ballot, voters may teach the elected that feeding their families is more important than feeding the beast of local government.

Word Count: 740

“... [O]ur elected leaders can’t read the room either. Sitting safely in their home offices, collecting steady paychecks, and venturing out for a photo op at a protest, they continue to push ever higher taxes on their struggling constituents.”

Portland Politicians Suffer From the Edifice Complex

By Eric Fruits, Ph.D.

On July 24th, the New York Times ran a 2,300-word [piece](#) describing the challenges owners of vacation homes have faced in converting their second homes into their primary residences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges included the inability to get a Starbucks vanilla latte or find a bagel shop.

Readers overwhelming responded: “Read the room, New York Times!”

With millions out of work and struggling to pay the bills, it’s hard to sympathize with a vacation homeowner struggling to find a place in her second home to put a pencil holder and paper tray she bought in Florence, Italy.

Closer to home, our elected leaders can’t read the room either. Sitting safely in their home offices, collecting steady paychecks, and venturing out for a photo op at a protest, they continue to push ever higher taxes on their struggling constituents.

Less than five months after sending two new income taxes to the voters, Metro is now charging full speed ahead on a payroll tax to pay for the unneeded Southwest Corridor light rail project from Portland to Bridgeport Village. The project anticipates tearing up Barbur Boulevard and adding congestion to dozens of intersections and highway ramps. Making way for light rail will require the destruction of at least 78 residential dwellings, and as many as 293. In addition, as many as 156 businesses will be forced out, displacing up to 1,990 employees.

The payroll tax will cost about \$500 a year for the average household in the region. That’s \$500 that can’t be spent on rent, utilities, groceries and other necessities.

Read the room, Metro. Is a light rail line to an upscale shopping mall more important than the houses that’ll be bulldozed, the business that’ll be shuttered, and paychecks that’ll be raided?

The City of Portland is no better. Because of years of mismanagement, the city’s parks bureau has spent itself into a deep hole. Last year, the city closed the Sellwood and Hillside community centers. This year, Mayor Ted Wheeler cancelled all summer parks programs. Even with the cuts, the city claims the parks program



has a deficit of more than \$6 million.

Earlier this month, the city council voted to send a \$48 million-a-year property tax increase to the ballot to fund its mismanaged parks program. It's not clear why the city needs \$48 million to fill a \$6 million gap. But, I'm just a dumb voter who doesn't understand the ins and outs of government accounting.

Nevertheless, in a time when tenants can't pay their rents and homeowners can't make their mortgage payments, Mayor Wheeler and city council are promoting a tax increase that will cost the average Portlander \$180 a year. Read the room, Portland.

Of course, Multnomah County has to get into the money grab game, too. In November, voters will decide on a \$37 million property tax measure to increase library spending. That's about \$115 a year for the average household. Currently, all the county libraries are closed, except for picking up books put on hold. Maybe the libraries can wait until after this recession is over before reaching into our wallets. Read the room, Multnomah County.

Even though schools are closed and Portland Public Schools is still mumbling and fumbling over its plans for the fall, PPS is looking to send a \$1.1 billion property tax measure to the ballot in November. A big chunk of that money is earmarked to pay for nearly \$250 million in cost overruns from the last school bond measure.

With the pandemic causing a radical rethinking of how education is delivered to our children, perhaps now is not the right time to embark on a spending blowout to build more massive brick-and-mortar schools. Read the room, PPS.

For years – no, more like decades – Portland-area voters seemed to have demonstrated an endless tolerance for raising their own taxes. They also seem eager to elect politicians who promise more and more spending on massive and costly projects. This has been called the “Edifice Complex” – it's fun and sexy to be at the ribbon cutting for a new MAX line, library or remodeled school. There are no photo ops for trimming a budget.

In 2020, Portland-area politicians have become so consumed by their Edifice Complex that they have failed to read the room. In the middle of a pandemic and recession, voters may teach the elected that feeding their families is more important than feeding the beast of local government.

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