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Mingus Mapps wants to make Portland work better. Will voters support his back-to-basics pitch for mayor?

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By [Aviva Bechky](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Three years before he launched his bid for mayor, as hundreds protested the police nightly in downtown Portland and City Hall leaders edged to the left, Mingus Mapps [ran for city commissioner](#) as a change agent: a political newcomer challenging progressive firebrand and incumbent Chloe Eudaly with his moderate policies and mild-mannered tone.

Mapps attracted powerful supporters with his unusual optimism for the city's future. Neighborhood associations. Business groups. The Portland Police Association. They buoyed him [into office](#), where Mapps sounded the alarm on rising shootings and homicides, the explosion of fentanyl and homeless encampments and the city's obvious struggles to address those problems.

As other politicians shied away from publicly confronting such troubling topics, Mapps addressed them head-on, speaking directly to residents in [op-eds](#), on television and at town halls.

"He was speaking out forcefully on things that he believed in at a very difficult time," said Vadim Mozysky, a former candidate for City Council who is now running for the Multnomah County Commission. "That's exactly what you want a mayor to do."

Since then, however, Mapps' once-rising profile has cratered.

[Rene Gonzalez](#) has solidified himself as the council's most vocal law-and-order advocate while Commissioner [Carmen Rubio](#) has emerged as one of its most effective policymakers, notably outmaneuvering Mapps to streamline Portland's convoluted permitting process. Both are now leading candidates for mayor.

The Oregonian/OregonLive spoke to more than two dozen people who painted Mapps, a 56-year-old Buckman resident, as a smart and thoughtful policy maker committed to following the data. But they also described him as an indecisive leader and clumsy political player who panders to the bureaucracy and has lost some high-profile fights.

Mapps [announced](#) his candidacy for mayor long before his rivals, in July 2023, but went on to burn through his funds, [landing in debt](#) by February. As of Oct. 11, Mapps had just \$36,000 on hand, severely hamstringing his ability to reach voters in the final weeks of the race. For months, he campaigned only sporadically, hitting pause earlier this year, he said, to focus on his duties as commissioner. Recently, his campaign manager struggled to identify any events hosted by Mapps that a reporter could attend.



During his 2020 campaign for City Council, Mingus Mapps challenged the progressive status quo with more moderate ideas and support for police. Brooke Herbert/The Oregonian/OregonLive

However, Mapps maintains a base of support and has benefited from his mayoral rivals' fumbles. The Oregonian/OregonLive reported in September that Rubio racked up more than 150 parking tickets and traffic violations over two decades. Gonzalez, too, had his license suspended twice, and the city auditor is investigating his use of public money to spruce up his Wikipedia page.

In Mapps' eyes, that cleared a lane to attract undecided voters or those who have soured on his opponents. He's pinning his mayoral hopes on the idea that voters want a moderate who would cut through red tape and ensure Portland provides basic essential services.

"The approach I've taken to that work is to build systems that actually deliver for folks," he told The Oregonian/OregonLive. "I am not fundamentally ideologically driven."

His supporters insist his experience and background would make him a practical, considered mayor. A former political science professor, Mapps holds a Ph.D. from an Ivy League university, spent time working as a city bureaucrat before running for office and boasts of managing about a third of the city's 7,500-person workforce and half its \$8.2 billion budget as a commissioner.

But to many observers — even those who appreciate his record — Mapps has struggled to mount a convincing campaign.

"I like Mingus. He's deeply intelligent. He's a kind man," said Sgt. Aaron Schmutz, president of the Portland Police Association, which endorsed Gonzalez. Despite that, he added, "I have found his campaign to be hard to follow. It just seems like it has not been able to gain traction on a coherent plan forward."

Mapps' vision

Mapps focuses on walking in the center lane on issues that are top of mind for most Portlanders. He supports building more tiny home villages to house homeless people but also said that arresting people who refuse shelter is acceptable as a last resort. He supports increased policing but also voted for a police accountability system and advocated for police officers to wear body cameras.

Four years ago, his stances represented a bold shift toward the center. He accepted the police union's endorsement in a year when the Black Lives Matter movement spurred nationwide calls to disinvest in police and reimagine public safety. That was particularly significant given Mapps' personal story as a Black candidate raising two Black sons in the city.



Mingus Mapps, then a candidate for Portland City Council, speaks at a kid-centered gathering and march for Black lives at Sunnyside School Park in Portland in August 2020. Brooke Herbert/The Oregonian

But this year, it was Gonzalez who notched the endorsements of the police and firefighters unions and has made increasing Portland's police force, cracking down on homeless street camping and restoring the city's livability the central tenets of his campaign. Now, some observers say Mapps has lost his footing in the race.

"I don't see a campaign," said Sarah Iannarone, executive director of safe streets advocacy group The Street Trust, who challenged Ted Wheeler for mayor in 2020. "I don't know who has endorsed him. I don't know what his coalition is. He's not raising money. I don't see a vision or message from him."

Mapps insisted that voters are still interested in someone outspoken on public safety but less hard-line than Gonzalez. And, he said, he has the experience to ensure that city services operate smoothly, having been commissioner in charge of Portland's water, transportation, environmental services and emergency communications bureaus.

Part of that pitch rests on an early accomplishment: helping the Bureau of Emergency Communications lower 911 call wait times. The call times spiked during the pandemic, spurring a push by Mapps and others in the department to ramp up hiring and training. Though the bureau was reassigned to another commissioner, Mapps' groundwork helped: By the end of 2023, the average wait time had begun to fall after a three-year rise, though it remained at 51 seconds, much higher than the 2019 12-second average, according to a BOEC year-end [report](#).

Over the past two years, however, Mapps has failed at times to rustle up the votes to support his policy proposals, changed directions on key issues and often left policy stakeholders and his council colleagues puzzled.

He was a top proponent of charter reform during his 2020 campaign and launched the [Ulysses PAC](#) to promote governmental overhaul once he was elected. But when the city's Charter Commission came out with its proposed changes to Portland's government and election system, Mapps [opposed them](#), favoring less convoluted reforms.

He encouraged Portlanders to reject the charter changes on the November 2022 ballot so that they could support a plan he floated bringing to the May 2023 ballot instead. But some say he dropped the ball, and his plan fizzled.

Jessica Elkan, who worked with him on the Ulysses PAC, said she felt the campaign just lacked the political power to win.

"Commissioner Mapps either was going to fight really hard for what looked like a losing battle, or slowly remove himself from it," Elkan said.

His communication with colleagues and advocates has faltered at times. In 2023, he surprised his fellow commissioners by proposing to cut millions from racial equity advocacy group Reimagine Oregon, pointing out it had been allocated significant city money it hadn't spent.

Other councilors learned about his proposal just hours before it went before City Council, OPB [reported](#). It went on to fail, though Mapps insists his point remains valid.

And as the commissioner in charge of the Portland Bureau of Transportation, Mapps admitted that both people who support and oppose bike lanes felt unhappy with his decisions, though he rejected biking advocates' claim that he flip-flopped.

According to advocates, downtown business leaders asked Mapps to [remove the protected bike lane](#) along Southwest Broadway in 2023, which they said was hurting business, and Mapps agreed. But when the biking community revolted, biking advocates said he changed his mind.

"His communication style is really challenging," said Jonathan Maus, editor and publisher of BikePortland. "You have, I think, a political leader that isn't able to clearly articulate what they're trying to do or what they did."

A 'cerebral' bureaucrat

Mapps' supporters, in contrast, tout his thoughtful approach and fondness for the intricacies of government.

Mapps grew up moving around California. As a child, he remembers taking the public bus after school to the welfare office in Stockton, where his mom worked. He spent hours there, watching applicants fill out forms, seeing government up close.

“Lots of people can kind of point to, ‘Oh, government,’ as a black box,” Mapps said. “Government’s never been a black box to me.”



Mayoral hopeful Mingus Mapps studied and taught political science before taking a job with the city of Portland. Beth Nakamura

When he moved to Portland to attend Reed College, following in the footsteps of two aunts and an uncle, Mapps knew he wanted to study political science. He got his Ph.D. from Cornell University in the same field and spent time teaching at Bowdoin College, Portland State University and Brandeis University, writing about welfare policy and how redistricting influenced the representation of people of color in office.

He left academia to return to Portland in 2015, working first at the neighborhood group Historic Parkrose and then at the city’s Office of Neighborhood Involvement, now the Office of Community and Civic Life. There, he managed a crime prevention program and the neighborhood association system.

Current and former staff members described his in-depth approach to analyzing policy, with long hours at night spent reading up on the issues affecting his bureaus. He’s deeply interested in data-driven “good governance,” said Adam Lyons, his former spokesperson and senior policy adviser.

That’s essential for the upcoming mayor as the city inaugurates a new form of government, argued energy consultant Robert McCullough, a longtime City Hall watcher and Mapps supporter.

Portland’s next mayor won’t set policy or have veto power. An expanded 12-member City Council and its selected president will set legislative direction for the city, while the mayor will choose and oversee a professional city administrator, subject to council approval.

“This is going to be a political science problem,” McCullough said. “It is not going to be about homelessness, not going to be about the wretched economy, certainly not going to be about crime.”

Mapps is deeply invested in the details of government processes, digging into concerns like the need for better protective gear for city employees. That won him the endorsement of PROTEC17, the union representing many city employees in bureaus including transportation, water and environmental services — all of which Mapps has overseen.

But Mapps' critics say he's been overly focused on the bureaucracy at times.

This spring, Mapps vehemently opposed Rubio's proposal to consolidate building permitting into one agency. After talking with city employees, he suggested keeping staffers where they were and combing through city code to eliminate redundancies instead.

But Rubio outmaneuvered him to pass her proposal. To some, it seemed as if Mapps had been overly invested in advocating for employees, to the detriment of the city.

Mapps admitted he has sometimes prioritized the concerns of his bureaus above his own political future.

With the Portland Bureau of Transportation facing a budget shortfall of \$32 million last year, Mapps pushed hard for voters in the May primary to repass a 10-cent gas tax he said was desperately needed to keep the department functioning. He succeeded — but neglected his mayoral campaign for much of the winter and spring in the process.

"Given the choice between spending time on my campaign, or spending time being the public servant that I was elected to be," Mapps said, "I just always have to choose the public servant piece."

A stumbling campaign

Now in its 16th month, Mapps' campaign is low on funds, support and visibility.

As of Oct. 11, Mapps' campaign had reported raising about \$88,000 this cycle, plus \$100,000 in public matching funds, a key lifeline that came through this fall when he reached 750 Portland donors. However, his campaign coffers are almost empty just as voters are beginning to pay attention.

Turnover has been a problem too. His first campaign manager, Marnie Glickman, who is running for City Council in North and Northeast Portland, helped advise him but left before his campaign officially launched. His second, Bob Dobrich, moved to Connecticut. His third, Collin Erickson, who works for a political fundraising firm, took the job in July but only went full-time at the beginning of October.

To be sure, Mapps has built up support in some areas. Minority contracting businesses have hailed him as their champion on large public works projects. Neighborhood associations are generally still friendly, supporters said. A few influential politicians, like Margaret Carter and Avel Louise Gordly — the first African American women elected to Oregon's House and Senate, respectively — have endorsed him.

Mapps' optimism about the city, Gordly said, is a key part of his appeal: "He's spoken the word hope, said it out loud," she said. He's "someone who can speak to everyone, someone who doesn't have a deficit of compassion."



Commissioner Mingus Mapps' optimism for Portland's future has helped his rhetoric stand out. Shawnte Sims

But those endorsements aside, Mapps has largely been left without key power brokers or institutional backers on his side.

Along with being unable to secure the police union's endorsement he won in 2020, he's also seen business support slip away. Business interests have helped pour \$292,000 into an independent expenditure campaign for Gonzalez.

"It's neither unions nor businesses nor nonprofits," Mozyrsky said, describing Mapps' support base. "It's basically hoping that the voters will buy into the message."

Mapps and his supporters argue ranked-choice voting could help him pull out a victory, with voters allowed to rank up to six candidates and an August poll showing him tied for second with Rubio.

He was excluded from a mayoral debate hosted by the Portland Metro Chamber last month after failing to reply promptly to their invite and from one hosted by Portland's industrial districts because he did not meet fundraising requirements. But he did join a City Club of Portland debate Tuesday and will participate in another hosted by The Oregonian/OregonLive and KGW this week.

Nevertheless, Mapps' recent communications reflect some of his struggles in the campaign. In messaging to voters, he's begun positioning himself as an outsider, with Portland power brokers gatekeeping him from the race. When the Oregonian Editorial Board declined to invite Mapps to interview for an endorsement, his campaign sent out a furious newsletter.

And spurred by the missteps of Gonzalez and Rubio, he's rolled out new lines of attack. In a Willamette Week interview, Mapps accused Gonzalez of lying about being "accosted" by a Black woman on a MAX train. Video footage obtained and published by The Oregonian/OregonLive undercut Gonzalez's claims, showing the

woman may have at most brushed his arm.

And in a September newsletter, Mapps went hard after his opponents' traffic records.

"My opponents' actions show they feel that they are above the law," the newsletter read. "As a Black man, I don't get to flout the rules."

"If I had over 150 violations in recent years, not only would I not be on the City Council today, I would be in jail," Mapps continued.

To people who've watched Mapps from the beginning of his political career, the tone represented a drastic shift, even if it's driven by genuine anger. Back in 2020, the messaging was about "bridge building, bringing people together, bringing down the divisiveness," Lyons said, though Mapps said he threw punches at his opponent in that race, too.

As he fights for his political life now, going on the offensive may make sense. But people who've watched Mapps for years said the strategy doesn't sound like the man they know: an affable professor and policy wonk who cares deeply about the details of local government.

"My main focus, and the reason why I come to work every day, is to help our teams in the city deliver on the core services that folks expect," Mapps said. "I am not inclined to pander or to try to grab headlines. I do this work in order to, frankly, make the city work better."

— *Aviva Bechky covers politics and education for The Oregonian/OregonLive. They can be reached at abechky@oregonian.com or on X at [@avivabechky](https://twitter.com/avivabechky).*

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