

Vote, A*t L*ver

Portland's mayoral and council hopefuls seek your support, ant livers! (And art lovers, too.)

BY CIELO LUTINO: ILLUSTRATIONS BY COREY LUNN

GIVING YOU MORE ATTITUDE, LESS PLATITUDE

If you're an artist, expect a phat check in the mail from the City of Portland. Feel free to blow it on expensive art supplies or beachfront property since rent's free until the vacancies on city council are filled. It's not surprising that council candidates have conjured a Shangri-la Land in recent conversations about the arts. Mayoral hopeful Tom Potter has suggested waiving expensive system-development charges for nonprofit groups, including arts organizations, while Sam Adams has claimed he'd like to "make celebrities out of" artists. Reflecting on the arts forum sponsored by the Regional Arts and Culture Council (RACC) and Northwest Business for Culture and the Arts on July 21, Potter admitted, "You weren't going to hear anyone say, 'The hell with arts.'" The candidates expressed essentially the same sentiments at a similar forum organized by the *Portland Mercury*, Oregon Bus Project, and Pacific Northwest College of Art on August 19, where all but Francesconi were applauded for supporting the most popular idea of the day: investigating the possible conversion of the former granary Centennial Mills to an arts center (see Potter, below). Politicians are experts at blowing smoke up the right blowhole, which is why it's important to clear the air and find the attitudes behind the platitudes. Recent chats between the candidates and the *Organ* unplugged the smoke machine and revealed who might really champion the arts cause at City Hall and beyond.

WHO IT AIN'T

Sounding like a grumpy Italian grandfather at the July forum, Jim Francesconi complained, "We have too many visions. Everybody's got a vision." That is, everybody but Jim. Yes, during his seven years at City Hall, Francesconi called for audits of the Portland Bureau of Parks and Recreation and Portland Public Schools, and yes, he cofounded an after-school program, but the achievements don't go much further. No surprise, then, that his platform on the arts and government displays little substance or excitement. He supports increasing the Percent for Art Program from 1.33 to 2 percent—but so do the other candidates. He supports strengthening the arts in public education—but so do the other candidates. He supports marketing the local arts and culture scene as a tourist attraction—but so do the other candidates. Lest he sound like an echo, Francesconi has attempted to differentiate himself by offering minor improvements to the other candidates' ideas. For example, after belit-

tling Adams's suggestion that the City claim a fraction of business fees collected from films shot in Portland, he recommended rent-free use of City facilities for those same films. In other words, let's give the film and video industry our tax dollars because they'll more than repay it when their techs and roadies go out drinking at local bars. Good one, Jim.

Other than a striking lack of smarts, Francesconi distinguishes himself from Potter in his belief that City funds would be better used to build a new performance hall at PSU than to subsidize the costly renovation of Centennial Mills, as well as his emphasis on employment. According to him, a stable job market will invigorate the local economy and thereby benefit artists—but it will benefit everyone else, too, which makes it a pretty safe stand. In the end, there's nothing in sight, no real—ahem—vision for the arts if Francesconi takes the helm.



THE EX-COP ON TOP

In the parlance of the street, Tom Potter used to be a pig, but now he'd like to be Da Man. And he should be. Unlike Francesconi, Potter has plenty of ideas about how local government might support the arts. Citing Abraham Maslow, Potter believes each person has a hierarchy of needs that must be met in order to fully realize her or his potential. Applying this principle to the arts community, he observes, "It seems a lot of the lower-level stuff has been left out. We need infrastructure that helps meet artists' needs so they can have the time to self-actualize."

Potter recognizes that that infrastructure may need, well, a structure. He isn't shy about his support of the conversion of Centennial Mills, a former granary near the Pearl District, into an arts center for Portland like Dia:Beacon in upstate New York, or MASS MoCA, Massachusetts's contemporary art museum in North Adams.

And he's quick to demand that businesses receiving governmental assistance, such as tax exemptions or loans, are held accountable to the larger community.

By signing Community Benefits Agreements requiring them to give back to the public, "They could provide support to the arts, social programs, or schools," he says. "Give them a choice but make sure art is part of that choice."

He enthuses about another possibility: a yearly festival, like Bumbershoot, combining music and art and food, that would "celebrate what Oregon has to offer" and "put Portland on the map." Its revenues, he says, could help fund RACC, PICA, and other arts groups, and while the first year may be a loss, the effort "could be terribly exciting."

Potter's ideas tend to be fuzzy on the financial details, and you have to wonder how many of them can be realized. But his willingness to consider different options to boost Portland's arts community is more impressive than Francesconi's glum reminders of the city's existing deficits. At a time when public and private resources are growing leaner and leaner, Portland needs a leader open to creative ways of reversing the trend.



IN HOT WATER

Nick Fish is in trouble. His competitor is pretty good, but Fish is equal to the challenge. In fact, the runoff between Fish and Sam Adams really makes you wish one of them had run against Randy Leonard, who upbraids his employees in public and has earned the wrath of neighborhood groups for, in their view, pandering to business interests. Yet he still received the *Willamette Week's* endorsement.

The choice between the two is particularly tough on arts issues. Fish has a long history of supporting the arts and has been an avid consumer of arts and culture since he moved here from New York City in 1996, haunting Jimmy Mak's and the now defunct Jazz de Opus. He supports Chamber Music Northwest, donated to PICA last year via the new Oregon Cultural Trust, and plunked down 250 bones to be a guest DJ on KMHD, Portland's jazz station. Back East, he chaired the St. Mark's Historic Landmark Fund, which preserved an underused historic church by enabling a consortium of arts groups, including Danspace, Poetry Project, and the Ontological Hysteric Theater, to use the space in exchange for sliding-scale rent. Fish's experience with that model of community and economic development would benefit Portland, where religious institutions such as the Beth Israel Synagogue and the First Unitarian Church face

financial woes that might bring about the demolition of some of the city's most interesting historic buildings.

Fish's background with St. Mark's, as well as his involvement with the Housing Authority of Portland's effort to create a privately funded public art program for North Portland's Columbia Villa housing project, illustrates his savvy fund-raising skills in the private sector. "In a time of diminishing resources, we have to look to creative ways of financing things we care about," he says. "With the arts, it means tapping the wealth in our private sector."

While Fish would aim for including Portland in the top ten US cities for funding of the arts, he also seeks parity in the distribution of public dollars. "If a handful of developers and arts advocates have preferential access to City Hall, then they're going to get more than their fair share," he says. "Portland Center Stage is an important arts organization, but we just put \$28 million in public subsidy into one organization. My commitment as the next city commissioner is to level the playing field, and my particular interest is nurturing community-based organizations." If he fails to land a spot on city council this fall, the arts community should enlist Fish for his expertise and encourage him to go after Leonard in the next election or Eric Sten's seat when he steps down.

HE'S BETTER THAN THE BEER

While Sam Adams may share a disturbing love of regulatory reform with Leonard, he can take him on the issue of arts and culture, hands down. He could probably take all of the candidates on that issue because he has such refreshingly concrete ideas about how to shake it up. All the lip service paid to the arts community since the publication of economist Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*, which argues that cities need to attract a workforce for the creative services industry in order to compete in the global market, may actually amount to something with Adams, who says, "What I hear from artists is they want tangible financial support." He talks about earmarking a portion of the business license fees and business income taxes from movies filmed in Portland for local arts and culture but honestly warns of the shortcomings of doing so: "It's feast or famine but capture it while it's here. Then invest it in the foundation of the local arts community so that it isn't used for one-time projects."

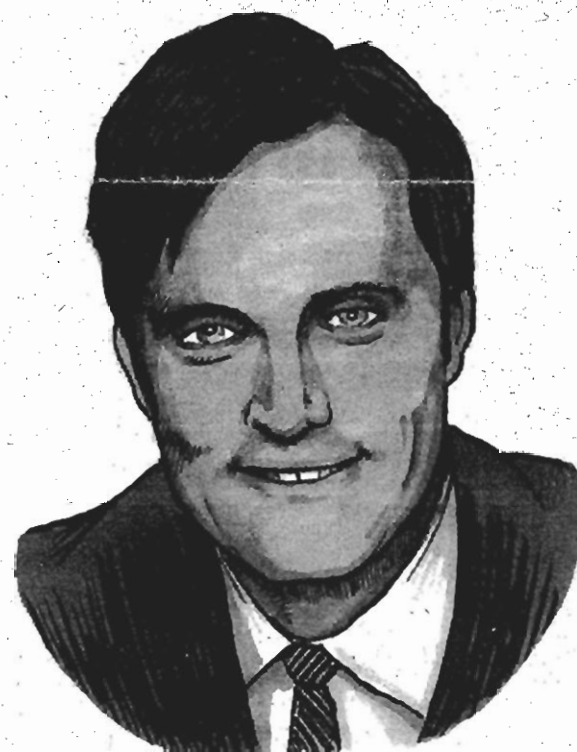
He's similarly forthcoming about the much-lauded elevation of the Percent for Art Program—"Maintenance of what already has been invested in would use up a lot of the increase, I'm afraid," he says—but he's still positive about the good that can come from it: "I'll try

to close all the loopholes to make sure the 2 percent applies where it should apply, and RACC has some oversight over that."

Like Potter, Adams is interested in stimulating workplace giving for the arts, maybe by marketing a kind of United Way fund for the arts. Both Potter and Adams are probably influenced by their time at the City of Portland, which targets an aggressive—and highly successful—United Way campaign at their employees during the holidays.

But Adams would like to do more than the much-needed financial fix-its. "The RACC board has great people on it," he says, "but I think its structure is underpowered." Drawing on his experience as a board member of the Portland Oregon Visitors Association, Adams prescribes specific changes: "Make sure it's got enough artists and elected officials who will serve as advocates back in their institutions during budget time and serve as sources of information with their public."

"There's no one thing that's going to solve the funding problem for the arts," Adams concludes, arguing that a variety of small sources must be mined. Adams's dose of realism may be just the antidote for a community sick of hearing abstract strategies for the arts.



VOTE F*CKER

If you were electing candidates based on their arts platform alone, then Potter for mayor and Adams for the empty council seat would be your ticket. But that's not the only issue at stake in these races. So go find out more about the candidates, like why Francesconi voted against the city's antiwar resolution, why Leonard is such a big fan of Adams, or why developer Bob Gerding supports Fish, despite Fish's public criticisms of Gerding's projects. What you learn may have you erasing your ballot a few times before settling on a solid choice.

And no discussion of local politics is complete without an understanding of the larger political picture. As Fish observes, "We have an administration in Washington that is not friendly to cities, so cities are being starved. Cities don't have adequate resources to run their police and fire and basic services, so we know what gets cut." He's talking about so-called "amenities" like the arts, so before you whine about what's going on in your backyard, think about who we've got in the White House and who we could have instead. The *Organ* shouldn't have to say more.