

AN ASSESSMENT OF CITY GOVERNMENT IN PORTLAND, OREGON

AND THE 1970 ELECTION

POSITION PAPER NO. 1
ON PORTLAND'S CITY GOVERNMENT

Morton Spence

July, 1969

An Assessment of City Government in Portland, Oregon, and the 1970 Election

Portland's city government, like that of almost all major cities, is in trouble. The most recent local evidence of the malaise which afflicts metropolitan jurisdictions across the nation was the difficulty in balancing the budget for the 1969-70 fiscal year after allowing for inflation, including only modest salary increases for city employes.

The tragedy is that municipal governmental problems in Portland as in other cities coincide with increasing demands for services occasioned by population shifts. Portland, however, unlike many cities in the eastern United States, still has time to keep its core area from becoming a jungle from which its citizens want desperately to escape. It may still be saved as a place where all sorts of people may enjoy living and working.

Yet it cannot be denied that Portland is threatened with the same fate as Cleveland or Chicago or many other cities. A distressing number of the leaders of Portland's business, industrial, professional and cultural life no longer reside within the city limits. They pay their taxes to a suburban government; they and their families, when the work day and the work week are over, consider that they have made a successful retreat from the city, and their civic responsibilities are directed toward the community in which they live, not where they work.

Some of the great old neighborhoods in Portland now are officially — by the federal government's Office of Economic Opportunity — termed "poverty

pockets." Portland is not yet overwhelmed by slums like Cleveland or Chicago, but its oldest neighborhoods are blighted, unattractive, sub-standard. Only people with sub-standard incomes -- those who are forced by economic necessity -- live there.

At the same time as the need for building code enforcement, imaginative city planning and active citizen participation has increased, in order to provide the tools for attacking the problems of urban blight, property values have fallen, moderate-income people have moved away from the problems, and city government increasingly has been seen as "The Enemy" by those who most need effective city government.

Add to these seemingly inexorable trends the vast capacity of man en masse to pollute his environment with offenses to the eyes, nose, ears and lungs, and the magnitude of the dilemma seems overwhelming.

Over against this stands an archaic city government more concerned to perpetuate itself than to attempt to cope creatively with the exigencies, peopled by tired, old, sick men -- one of the oldest, alas, still in his 40s -- who ignore, or retreat defensively from, expressions of concern from their constituents.

Yet it cannot be said that the form of municipal government in Portland is the basic problem, or that a new city charter would provide an easy route for its solution. It is true, however, that almost all other cities which have had the commission form -- in which both legislative and administrative functions are served by members of a small city council -- have chosen to replace it with systems which combine a more representative legislative branch with professional administration.

Nevertheless, a survey report in 1959 by Public Administration Service, a Chicago-based consulting and research firm, pointed out that in U.S. communities "the choice of basic form of municipal government organization is a choice almost

universally reserved to the people."¹

The P.A.S. study itself was in part an outgrowth of an unsuccessful effort -- the margin was about 38,000 votes -- by interested persons and groups to gain voter approval of a change in the basic form of city government in Portland in 1958. Again in 1966, a new city charter which would have provided a "strong mayor" administration and a widely representative city council went down to defeat, this time by a 2 to 1 rejection.

Persons who see deficiencies in Portland city government must face the hard fact that a majority of the city's voters do not share their concern, or at least they must accept the necessity of finding another route to reform than sweeping charter revisions or proposals of a new -- and untried -- system.

The P.A.S. study concluded:

"The people of Portland are now enjoying a reasonably high level of municipal services at a rather modest cost. The City's officials and employees are dedicated public servants who are competent in their jobs, and the recognition they now receive is less than they deserve. By and large, modern equipment, techniques, and work procedures are employed in the conduct of municipal activities. Certainly, improvements can be made which will result in better services and more effective and economical operations, and this is true of any large organized effort, public or private, at any given time. Portland today is at least as well governed as the average large American city."²

It is true that the P.A.S. study provided some recommendations for changes in procedures and organization within the present charter, some of them very significant, and that some of these have been ignored or rejected while others have been instituted. But Public Administration Service did not advocate a charter change to a new form of city government at that time. Whether the same conclusion would be reached today is a matter for conjecture. It is certain that the people of Portland have spoken once again on the question more recently and it seems more realistic at this time to consider ways in which reforms can be achieved under the

¹The City Government of Portland, Oregon -- A Survey Report. Public Administration Service, Chicago. December, 1959. p. 2.

²Ibid., p. 3.

present charter while creating a climate for governmental changes, preferably such as would embrace the whole metropolitan area of Portland.

Many descriptive words may justifiably be applied to the atmosphere of City Hall or to the people who are responsible for what occurs or fails to occur there 10 years after the P.A.S. report, but "corrupt," "dishonest," or "sinister" are not appropriate. However desperately one may seek for evidence, it is as difficult now as it was in 1959 to substantiate any charge of corruption in Portland city government.

Elected officials may be called inept, they may be charged with lack of vision, imagination, sensitivity, creativity and leadership; it may be said with some aptness that weariness, tedium, boredom pervade the corridors of City Hall, that there is no excitement, no sense of direction, no urgency, little comprehension of the physical and social ills which Portland shares with urban centers everywhere in the nation.

Portland city government, on the basis of its recent record, may fairly be charged with nonfeasance, but not with malfeasance.

Candid acknowledgment of the political realities — that Portland city officials are good, gray workhorses, liked by the average voter and endured with minimal grumbling by almost all; that the need for change may be urgent, but that the vast majority of the people have not grasped the urgency; that although the machinery of municipal government may be worn, even obsolete, it is still functioning and can be kept serviceable until it can be replaced; that despite the revolutionary temper of the times (or because of it) there is a strong conservative reaction against radical proposals and against persons identified with radical, liberal or even "progressive" causes — is prerequisite to any dispassionate, rational appraisal of proposals to challenge incumbent elective officials and to efforts to devise strategy for unseating them.

Having faced these realities, a look at the election in 1970 is in order. The terms of two incumbent commissioners, Mark O. Grayson and Francis J. Ivancie, and the city auditor, Ray Smith, will expire January 1, 1971, and lacking evidence to the contrary it may be assumed they all will seek reelection.

Commissioner Grayson has been in office since January, 1959; Commissioner Ivancie is in his first term, having been elected in 1966 after several years' service as administrative assistant to Mayor Terry Schrunk. Mr. Smith became city auditor in January, 1959, after previous public service with the State of Oregon.

It may be noted that both commissioners whose terms expire are already campaigning, Grayson tallying merit points for his competent administration of the Water Bureau and the renovated and successful Civic Auditorium, Ivancie as Commissioner of Public Affairs whose responsibilities have included Portland's in-many-ways-enviable Park System and periodic assignments as acting mayor during Mayor Schrunk's illnesses.

Ivancie is frequently and highly visible in the news media, not always favorably but always unmistakably. Despite the longer tenure of all other members of the City Council, he probably is recognized by the public more readily than any with the possible exception of Mayor Schrunk.

Ivancie made it clear that he has ambitions for higher political office by announcing three years ago his intention to run for Secretary of State of Oregon, a move that was frustrated by a City of Portland charter provision which states, "A vacancy in office shall occur whenever the mayor, a commissioner or the auditor shall, during his term of office, become a candidate for any lucrative district, county, state or national office elective by the people . . ."³

³The Charter of the City of Portland, Oregon (Recodified and Annotated 1967), Section 2-206a.

His efforts to have the charter provision declared unconstitutional failed when the Oregon Supreme Court upheld it.

Since that set-back, Ivancie has applied himself, in his own peculiar way, to the office of city commissioner. His increasingly-frequent verbal battles in public with Mayor Schrunk indicate he may have his eye on that office in 1972; reelection as commissioner next year would almost surely be basis and prelude to further political endeavor.

Unlike Grayson, who avoids controversy, Ivancie seems to thrive on it. He has been aggressively conservative in his approach to social problems, backing efforts of the police to control use of Lair Hill Park by persons he considers to be "undesirables," prohibiting wading in Lovejoy Fountain and sponsoring a curfew closing city parks at night.

Ivancie seems determined to fill the void in City Hall's leadership with statements of negative criticism and acts which border on arrogance.

His insistence on purchase of synthetic turf for the Municipal Stadium, his pushing to acquire and raze the old Journal Building (in itself a potentially positive project) and then recommending "solving" a less-than-urgent traffic problem by relocating Harbor Drive next to SW Front Avenue and designating both -- a total of 10 lanes of concrete between downtown and the riverfront -- as freeways, are recent examples of his bad judgment and his apparent insensitivity to the public good.

Nevertheless, Ivancie is succeeding in creating an image of himself as "a mover" within a system otherwise characterized as unmoving, static. His tactless haste is doubtless often relished by those who do not analyze the results of his action; he fosters the impression that he is a "decisive man of action."

Sensitive observers of the Ivancie phenomenon, however, are dismayed. His dealings with people in the "poverty pockets" of Northeast and Southeast Port-

land in the early months of the Model City program when, during Mayor Schrunk's illness he was acting mayor, often were embarrassingly callous.

Ivancie was the principal enemy in City Hall -- reflecting and/or encouraging opposition on the part of the Portland Development Commission -- to what potentially was the most constructive citizen-led approach to urban problems in Portland in recent years, the Southeast Uplift Program.

Deriving from a sense of frustration that the poverty areas in the Southeast part of the city (which previously had been identified and recognized by the Office of Economic Opportunity's War on Poverty) were not included in the Model City area boundaries, the Southeast Uplift Program was a spontaneous effort to mobilize the poor to help themselves.

Indigenous leadership appeared like a phoenix arising from the rubble and decay of deteriorating neighborhoods and called the people together, urging them to support each other in seeking counsel and financial aid from foundations, private sources and the federal government to attack the social and physical ills afflicting their neighborhoods.

Ivancie and the P.D.C. succeeded in dampening and finally defeating the grass-roots energy of the people in the Southeast by insisting that all community-renewal plans be approved, and preferably that they be made, by the P.D.C. and handled "through channels" to City Hall. Even the governor was prevailed upon to become an accessory to the Ivancie-inspired injustice, and he vetoed a federal grant for a "people-oriented" planning effort on the basis that it duplicated P.D.C. planning -- planning which still has not occurred.

The frequency with which Ivancie's name appears in the news is attributable to his penchant for outrageous quotations.

At virtually every meeting of the executive committee of the Columbia Region Association of Governments (CRAG), he is belligerent, aggressive and rude

to representatives of other local governments with whom the Portland delegate might logically achieve some rapport as a foundation for cooperation in solving metropolitan problems.

Time and again in meetings of the City Council or conferences where the press is present, Ivancie succeeds with a few well-chosen words to toss a monkey-wrench into the machinery of progress. His oft-repeated judgments of "hippies," "militants," young people who in various ways — almost all of them non-violent expressions of a deep concern — call into question the accepted, white middle-class criteria of today's society; his unwavering support of the police in the face of incontrovertible evidence of police provocation; his condemnation of volunteer efforts by qualified professionals to contribute positively to the problem of the youth-drug culture (as, for instance, the Outside Inn project, the Youth Ministry of the Greater Portland Council of Churches, and others), these incur the indignation and sometimes the wrath of persons with a social conscience.

Yet Ivancie's judgments on social issues probably reflect those of a majority of white, middle-class Portland, the same people who are most conscientious about expressing themselves among their friends, in their clubs, lodges and business or professional societies, and at the polls.

Those who are distressed that Ivancie has this place and this posture in Portland city government should not delude themselves that the majority of Portland citizens see the issues from the same perspective. The political climate of fear which can result in the George C. Wallace phenomenon and which uncritically applauds any political statement advocating firmness for "law and order" in the sense of police control on the national scene, has also pervaded Portland's electorate.

For the reasons stated earlier, Francis J. Ivancie is the greatest threat to freedom and progress in Portland municipal government and his defeat in the 1970 election is crucial if there is to be any hope of reform within the present com-

mission form of city government and eventual change to a style more appropriate to the present age.

For the reasons that Francis J. Ivancie is an incumbent, that he mirrors the fears and frustrations of a frightened and insensitive electorate, and that he will undoubtedly have whatever financial support he deems necessary in his campaign for reelection, he likely will be an even more formidable opponent than Mark Grayson, who is not evil but who is only a pedestrian in the space age.

To achieve any significant position of strength on the Portland City Council, persons who want changes need both Grayson's and Ivancie's seats. But Ivancie is the primary target. He is the chancre on the body politic — and amputation is indicated.

— Morton Spence

FORTHCOMING POSITION PAPERS —

No. 2

People — Portland's Most Potent Resource

July, 1969

No. 3

Portland's Environment — A Critical Overview

August, 1969

No. 4

The Problem of Getting Elected

September, 1969