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Affordable housing, COVID, climate change: Portsmouth's incoming council shares top priorities

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PORTSMOUTH — New Portsmouth Mayor Deaglan McEachern talked about the need to address the issues of development and climate change during the city's inaugural ceremony Monday.

"As a council, we need to address how we grow as a city, development is vital but we need to make sure it doesn't leave behind the character that defines our city: our people," McEachern said.

McEachern stated during his inaugural address that he will call on the new City Council during its first 100 days to "review and make recommendations" to the city's zoning ordinances.

'We work together': Portsmouth's new Mayor Deaglan McEachern calls for action in first 100 days

He also stressed the need for Portsmouth to "prepare for climate change."

"This goes beyond acting locally We must be the tip of the spear in New Hampshire," he said, while calling for the creation of a "climate action plan to incorporate across all of our departments."

Assistant Mayor Joanna Kelley believes one of the top priorities for the new City Council "has to be affordability in Portsmouth, especially housing."

"This includes rental and entry-level home ownership. Developing a stronger partnership with the non-profit developers such as PHA (Portsmouth Housing Authority) is a very attainable goal," Kelley said in response to a question from Seacoast Media Group about what the incoming council's top priorities should be. "The city and PHA have worked hand and hand for years and will for years to come. I look forward to working with PHA to find developable city parcels and mitigating costs, thus increasing our affordable/workforce rental market."

Sports complex? Housing? Ideas arise as Portsmouth approves $10M Community Campus purchase

Kelley also stated the new council needs to work on funding the workforce housing trust, "which was developed in 2009, but currently lacks any funds or any direct means of funding," she said.

"I believe it's a great opportunity for us to help residents find and purchase homes in conjunction with the Hometown Buyer program," the incoming assistant mayor said. "Lastly, but definitely not least, we have to look at the long-term effects of COVID on our city; including outdoor dining and our school-aged children."

Seacoast Media Group asked all nine members of the new City Council, who were sworn in Jan. 3, to weigh in on what they thought the council's top priorities should be, and to address how the council can restart the McIntyre redevelopment process. That saga is now mired in a legal battle between the city and its estranged development partners, Redgate/Kane.

Here's a look at what the councilors who responded had to say:

John Tabor

John Tabor, one of only two sitting city councilors who were reelected, cited the need "to get the McIntyre project out of the ditch and on the road to completion."

"We have seven new councilors to get up to speed, but it seems sensible to me to try to find a way forward with Redgate/Kane, end the lawsuit and build the Community Plan," Tabor said. "If their demands are too much for taxpayers, find another way."

What's next? Portsmouth seeks new McIntyre developer while battling Redgate/Kane in court

Tabor also pointed to the need for the council to "stabilize our workforce."

"Hiring is a struggle and it's eating away at our local economy. We need ways to house people affordably, as well as transportation and parking solutions that enable someone to commute here, park once and commute home as easily and cheaply as possible," he said.

Tabor believes Portsmouth should become "a leader in the state in sustainable practices."

"A bold move we can make is to develop a Community Power plan that aggregates our consumer electricity demand to buy cheaper green power," he said. "Our committee will seek public input and support for that in 2022."

In addition, Tabor stated “we always need dialogue on development in Portsmouth. How much is essential to keeping us vibrant as a city, and how much is too much?”

“As part of the 2025 Master Plan process, we should convene a citywide dialogue involving a large and diverse group of people over multiple nights,” he said. “The resulting community consensus should guide zoning that balances quality of life with growth.”

Moving forward, he noted too that the new council will face a real estate revaluation, labor contracts, the Prescott Park renovation, “COVID's lurking threat (and) a 400th birthday.”

Josh Denton

Josh Denton’s top three priorities “are responding to COVID, mitigating climate change and increasing our affordable housing stock.”

“COVID will persist until all elected officials lead by example, listen to the science and become proactive. We must be ready to act against the current infection uptick or the new variant, whether it be with mandates or by codifying outdoor dining to reassure our struggling businesses that any investments are worthwhile,” said Denton, who has previously served on the council.

He called for incentivizing “these restaurants with outdoor dining on city property to be good stewards, instead of assessing fees under the new outdoor dining ordinance, fees should be assessed under our 2019 ordinance to just those that do not compost, because food waste is the third largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions.”

Denton cited the need for Portsmouth to increase its affordable housing stock to “help residents and businesses alike.”

“We should proactively change our zoning to mandate the building of more affordable units and work with the Portsmouth Housing Authority to break ground on city property like the Robert Lister Academy,” Denton said.

In terms of the McIntyre, Denton likes “the conceptual redesign” of the project but he said he couldn’t “determine the best course forward until we receive information regarding the lawsuits and how much the current course will cost taxpayers.”

Andrew Bagley

Andrew Bagley said the council’s top priority should be “affordable housing, particularly encourage the use of ADUs (accessory dwelling units).”

“We can do this by streamlining the application process and simplifying the requirements,” he said.

Bagley also pointed to the need for a “COVID bounce back for our youth who lost so much, by working closely with the School Board and Recreation Department making sure that they have the resources that they need.”

“One area of concern is the number of potentially expensive lawsuits the city is facing,” he said. “In regards to any current or pending litigation, I will not comment further until I have had a chance to be fully debriefed by the legal department after my term starts in January.”

“It is important to consider the taxpayer burden and the consequences especially for those on fixed incomes when we make decisions as a council,” he added.

Bagley said he would “like to see the city continue and improve outdoor dining and all the vibrancy that it has brought to our city.”

Rich Blalock

Rich Blalock said, “We must work together as a council and a community to keep one another safe, healthy and happy.”

“It’s important to look out for one another and work together. As a council, it’s important for us to lead by example,” Blalock said.

In terms of issues, Blalock said he looks forward to working on the council “on addressing the lack of workforce and affordable housing in Portsmouth.”

“I think it’s a good idea to look at what other communities are doing to promote or incentivize both workforce and affordable housing,” Blalock said. “We could also look at potentially repurposing some underutilized buildings that already exist.”

Blalock called the proposed acquisition of Community Campus “another top priority that is a very exciting opportunity for Portsmouth, and pointed to the need to use the property “in a way that best benefits us all as a community.”

He called the development of a Portsmouth skate park “another exciting project that encourages mental health and provides a safe place for our children to skate.”

“I have been working on this for some time and I know it will take some more time, but I would love to see it through,” Blalock said. “At the same time, we need to strive to keep the tax rate as low as possible. We will encourage the use of federal and state funds if available, and work to keep our AAA bond rating to help accomplish these goals.”

Kate Cook

Kate Cook believes the new council “must tackle the ongoing challenges our nonprofits, small businesses and arts industry are facing due to the pandemic, specifically around workforce shortages, lost income and childcare shortages that impact workforce.”

“We need to consider a grants program for those most impacted, whether through direct aid or through programs/services, including incentives for a return to work, specifically in child care,” Cook said. “The American Rescue Plan Act funding provides us an unprecedented opportunity to create a program, working with advice from the Economic Development Commission and the Mayor’s Blue Ribbon Committee on Arts and Nonprofits, to provide this needed relief.”

Cook also believes it’s time for the council “to adopt a climate action plan for the city of Portsmouth.”

“We should work with the Sustainable Practices Blue Ribbon Committee to develop a comprehensive plan that could be adopted by the end of 2022, in time for Portsmouth’s 400th Anniversary,” she said. “This will require immediate work to draft a plan, with input from governmental agencies, businesses, climate experts, and our residents, to address the ongoing challenges we face from environmental degradation to sea-level rise.”

In terms of the McIntyre redevelopment, Cook said “following guidance from the city of Portsmouth Legal Department, I did not address the question around the McIntyre redevelopment.”

“Once we are seated as a council, and can receive briefings on the ongoing litigation, I will be more comfortable responding to questions on this issue,” she said.