

HVJ Fall 2024 Voting Guide

Portland City Council - District 2

Every election season, Homeless Voices for Justice (HVJ) creates educational voter material and visits several community locations to register people to vote. This year, we sent all candidates a series of questions and have published all of their answers here.

HVJ is a grassroots organization that works for social change with, and on behalf of, people experiencing homelessness and poverty. HVJ is led by organizers who have all experienced homelessness. The founding group in Portland has existed since 1995, and we network in other locations across Maine. Our goal is to build a coalition for, and of, people experiencing homelessness and poverty throughout Maine. We seek to empower people experiencing homelessness and poverty whose perspectives are often excluded from the development of policies and programs that impact their social and economic wellbeing. Disenfranchisement, oppression, and marginalization creates this absence. Therefore, we hope to assert ourselves and our interests in Maine politics through protest, education, positive policy change and reform.

HVJ meets every Monday morning from 9:30-11:30am and is welcoming of everyone who has experienced, or is currently experiencing, homelessness.

For more information, email HVJ@preblestreet.org or call 207-899-6042 with questions.

Are you registered
to vote?

Visit vote.org to
register and see
what's on your ballot



City Council – District 2



Atiim B. Boykin



Nancy English



Catherine Nekoie



Robert O'Brien



Wes Pelletier



Atiim Boykin (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Community Forensic Intensive Case Manager, Office of Behavioral Health at The Department of Health and Human Services - Cumberland County
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Public infrastructure
 - Fostering community connections
 - Enhancing public safety
 - Environmental justice
 - Rental law and development

Nancy English (she/her)



- Current Position:
 - Freelance writer
- Issues and Priorities:
 - For rent and to buy
 - Ordinances
 - Demonizing
 - Traffic
 - A way back
 - Paying up
 - Climate

Catherine Nekoie (she/her)



- Current Position:
 - Realtor at Lucas Real Estate
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Protection of parks and open spaces
 - Safety issue of Sprague Coal Pile
 - Convert State and High Street to two-way traffic and improve upon pedestrian and bike safety
 - Strengthen our schools
 - Ensure access to affordable housing
 - Stewardship of our environment
 - Practice fiscal responsibility



Robert O'Brien (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Senior Housing Specialist at Camoin Associates
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Commercial street is going under
 - Stop governing by referendum
 - Housing

Wes Pelletier (he/him)



- Current Position:
 - Community organizer and activist
- Issues and Priorities:
 - Protect tenants and build affordable housing
 - Reduce car dependence and make Portland more walkable/bikeable
 - Create tax fairness
 - Fight for economic equity
 - Protect LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights
 - Build a stronger democracy
 - Foster the forest city

In your opinion, what are the most urgent issues facing the city of Portland?

Atiim B Boykin:

"Housing (from affordability to rezoning & construction) and Homelessness, Mental Illness & Health, Transportation."

Nancy English:

"Housing, homelessness, and transportation have emerged as the most important issues I am encountering. People renting apartments are worried about affording them next year and being able to stay. People who want to rent are priced out. Others who own may not see how to pay a mortgage if they lose a job. If our bus systems were improved, it would ease the stress on household budgets by removing the need to maintain a car. These issues work together to cause stress on the City's budget, increasing tax bills. It's a cycle we need to help stop."

Catherine Nekoie:

"The unhoused, needle disposal issues, drug addiction issues."

Robert O'Brien:

"#1 Housing, housing, and housing. #2 The Council is not proactive enough about issues that affect residents and it leads to referendums every year. #3 That Portland has no plan for sea rise."

Wes Pelletier:

"Housing, transit, and accessibility to government"



If you were to distinguish yourself from your opponent(s) for voters, what would you highlight as three critical differences?

Atiim B Boykin:

"I have over 20 years experience working with the most vulnerable on the frontlines and in leadership. I'm a creative person from music and visual arts, and I'm experienced with grassroots organizing and fundraising."

Catherine Nekoie:

"I am a positive, goal oriented, confident decision-maker who values the perspectives of others. I actively listen and strive to understand how and why people have arrived at their views. I am a pragmatic small business owner, property owner, and have raised three successful children with my husband in this city and understand the issues parents, and guardians may encounter. I am curious, respectful, and grateful, for all that Portland has given me and my family. It is time for me to give back to the city of Portland."

Nancy English:

"I worked for the city for 11 years as a paralegal in the city attorney's office. I worked on hundreds of agendas and understand how the Portland City Council effects changes. I am familiar with city contracts, with its bidding processes and with many of its challenges. I am also now retired and able to put my energy and attention to work for constituents without the demands of fulltime work. My range of experience and the ups and downs I have encountered give me insight into many problems – but on this last point, life experience is something all the candidates share."

Robert O'Brien:

"(1) My full-time job is conducting housing studies and writing housing action plans for cities all across America. I bring the most experience and expertise to address the housing crisis Portland faces right now. (2) I am the only candidate in my district with elected and appointed public service experience. I can tell you firsthand that experience matters if you want to be effective in delivering public policy. (3) I was a renter for 8 years in Portland -- I've lived paycheck-to-paycheck before and I've had my landlord knock on my door to announce rent was going up because taxes just went up. Since 2009, I've been a homeowner and landlord myself of a one-bedroom apartment. I've lived these three experiences -- renter, property-tax payer, and landlord -- and I know what it's like to live in each role and the issues that each face. (4) I was on the Portland school board for three years, I'm a product of the Portland Public Schools, and I have two children in the Portland Public Schools as well. The school budget is 50% of our tax bill and a Councilor's experience with the school systems matters."

Wes Pelletier:

"First and foremost, I'm a renter, and I understand the background fear of housing insecurity that the majority of folks in this city, as renters, feel on a day to day basis. Also, as a lead organizer in Maine DSA's People First Portland and Livable Portland campaigns, I gained experience researching and writing policy that would benefit the poor and working class. Lastly, having helped found the Trelawny Tenants' Union, I have a great deal of experience doing the actual spadework organizing that builds community and buy-in among folks that are used to being ignored by a system that's supposed to help them, and work with them to make it work as it should."

What is your plan to address the root causes of homelessness and help people experiencing homelessness in your district find safe and stable housing?

Atiim B Boykin:

"Creating housing coral reefs. This means districts for educators, creatives, and other essential workers to ensure what brings people to Portland remains visible and viable."

Robert O'Brien:

"Things a City Councilor can support: (1) the school district's case workers for at-risk youth; (2) more Housing First developments; (3) the Portland Community Free Clinic; (4) an adequate number of beds and fair rules at the shelter; (5) the refugee and migrant shelter; (6) crisis response vans (instead of police response); (7) and broadly speaking, increasing housing production to bring down rental prices and increase availability."

Nancy English:

"I have spoken with leaders in many of the city's nonprofit social service providers, and I am so grateful to Spurwink, Commonsplace, Milestone, Community Housing of Maine, and Preble Street for their outreach and encouragement to their clients! Some told me individuals who seemed beyond help are learning to live in structured transitional housing. The Housing Navigators at Milestone go the distance with support for their newly housed clients, who may need re-orienting to their new environments. Portland can use more outreach but you can help us understand how to make relationships work that can develop into a path to a home, especially with the shelter resistant population that prefers the streets. We need to learn how to make time spent in transitional housing turn into a path to a real home."

Catherine Nekoie:

"My plan is to gain a deeper understanding of the current services and explore ways to enhance or improve their efforts. I hope to be of some value to these on going efforts and attend meetings on these matters."

Wes Pelletier:

"The first priority needs to be keeping people in homes, and I'm committed to making sure the city starts proactively enforcing rent control. As it is, if your landlord illegally raises your rent or violates the tenant protection laws, you have to report it to the city, who then alerts the landlord that you've done so. This often results in the tenant not having their lease renewed. This is unacceptable, and the city needs to begin sending out notices to every renter and landlord alerting them as to what the rent should be, and create mechanisms to ensure that tenants are paid back for any overages. We also need to build much more affordable housing, and I want to accomplish this through social housing programs, which would see the city invest equity in affordable and mixed-income housing to ensure that the units being built can be truly affordable."



Many communities are finding success with Housing First programs, which prioritize getting people into housing quickly with supportive services. What is your position on the Housing First approach, and would you support a Housing First location in your district?

Atiim B Boykin:

"Yes! It works and more housing stock must be created."

Robert O'Brien:

"I support Housing First. I think the best models are those found at Florence House, Logan Place, and Huston Commons, where a developer can construct the apartments using Low-Income Housing Tax Credits, where formerly chronically homeless tenants can use Housing Choice (a.k.a. Section 8) vouchers to pay the rent, and case management providers like Preble Street can use federal funding to provide support services to residents. Yes, I would support another Housing First development in my district (Florence House is a couple blocks away from me), but I do believe situating them appropriately is key for success."

Nancy English:

"Logan Place on Frederic Street and Florence House are the Housing First programs in District 2, with Florence House sharing a structure with a women's shelter. People who live nearby Florence House have been challenged by the chronic drug activity, camping, litter, and other issues from either one or both of these programs. I support these programs with the caveat that neighborhood concerns must be a top priority to the management and day-to-day operations. We all want new residents of housing first programs to succeed. Would it be possible to engage some residents in helping the neighborhood as well as themselves?"

Wes Pelletier:

"Yes, absolutely."

Catherine Nekoie:

"Yes"



Would you allow Portland residents to sleep outdoors?

Atiim B Boykin:

"As a last measure and with supervision from social services and law enforcement."

Nancy English:

"I do not believe we should allow people to sleep outside. Everyone deserves the dignity of decent shelter, and our lives and health depend on it in bad weather and the winter. "

Catherine Nekoie:

"No."

Robert O'Brien:

"I don't believe that encampments are healthy, but in order to ban them, the City is obligated to provide a safe bed for anyone who needs one. Encampments are different than an individual passing through sleeping next to a fence for the night; encampments are different than a small number of individuals sleeping on fringe land in the city. But setting up tent cities on public property proved itself to be mayhem in the recent past -- they're unsafe and unsanitary and too easily infiltrated by bad actors."

Wes Pelletier:

"Yes, though I'm in support of creating several designated encampments with semi-permanent structures or tents that have easy access to support services and are kept clean."



How do you plan to address the problem of food insecurity in the city of Portland and ensure that people in your district have enough food to achieve an active, healthy lifestyle?

Atiim B Boykin:

"Subsidies farmers willing to contribute with tax break incentives."

Catherine Nekoie:

"I am a strong advocate for addressing the problem of food insecurity. No one should go hungry in this city. I know first hand what it is like to be hungry."

Wes Pelletier:

"Making sure food distribution programs are widely publicized, numerous and easily accessible, and have quality food available needs to be a priority. I frequently volunteer with Presente Maine's Dispensa Solidaria Program, which goes to great lengths to provide high quality produce and groceries to Portland's working class, immigrant community, and I respect how much time and effort they put into making it feel like a community event, rather than something to be embarrassed about, and I'd like to help boost that."

Nancy English:

"Preble Street's food services is an incredible resource for this problem, providing food to the city's sheltered and unsheltered populations under its more-than-a-million-dollar contract with the City of Portland. Please help us understand how we can keep their lovingly prepared food from being wasted. By chance, the Washington Post published an article about state programs to cut waste on September 12, 2024, by Anna Phillips. Food waste bans have failed in every state that put them on the books but Massachusetts, which has an incredibly extensive food composting system already. We are lucky in being already at work with Garbage to Garden. With enforcement, this could work for Preble Street and the City of Portland too."

Robert O'Brien:

"I think this question is placed at the wrong level of government. I want Mayor Dion to lead the way in lobbying to put social services under the jurisdiction of the County government. Imagine if the County had a coordinator for emergency housing and food assistance and health care support, and every town didn't have to have its own tiny office for charitable support. At the county level, the County could bulk-purchase grocery staples and sell them at cost out of a pop-up grocery food truck that accepts SNAP benefits. The County could build a central food storage facility and every night have several vans make regular pick-ups of uneaten prepared food from restaurants and catered events and distribute them the next day to a countywide network of food banks. One of the benefits of having a County-coordinated effort is that -- in addition to Federal and State funds -- the County's efforts would be funded by taxes levied on towns based on property valuations -- meaning both businesses and all property-owning residents pay -- there aren't any communities to hide from helping. I also think that this is a Federal issue that Rep. Pingree's office talks about a lot: how much food we discard based on Federal "sell-by" dates. Finally, our Federal immigration system and migration response is an abomination. We know it's been screwed up for decades. It needs to evolve to today's realities."

What is your opinion on Maine's Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030? Do you agree with the governor's office's approach to this issue?

Atiim B Boykin:

"I'll need to research this better before answering, and I'm sure the governor's office is looking into this thoughtfully."

Nancy English:

"This looks like an excellent plan! In particular, this change – 'Use Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE) for SNAP to raise the gross income threshold to 200% of the federal poverty level and remove asset limits' – would be so helpful. State support for the food charity programs would help but can we rely on public-private programs for something as essential as food? We should constantly analyze those programs to ensure they are finding and serving everyone in need."

Catherine Nekoie:

"Strongly agree."

Robert O'Brien:

"There are a lot of broad-brush aspirations in the plan that don't feel very realistic to me. I also think by taking a universal approach in solving all of society's issues, it lessens the focus on the goal at hand. I would have been pleased to see more logistical solutions than naming systemic problems."

Wes Pelletier:

"The diagnosis and focus on systemic causes of hunger is well formulated, and the approach seems to be quantifiable and within the realm of possibility, so yes, I support it, and hope that it gets the continued funding and prioritization it needs."



The opioid epidemic is one of the biggest public health crises in the state of Maine. What programs or initiatives would you support to address this issue within your district?

Atiim B Boykin:

"I'm not one to recreate the wheel, and I am one to bring all of the voices to the table to understand what is working and what needs tweaking to meet dynamic needs."

Nancy English:

"The City Council's Health and Human Services Committee made a recommendation to the full council in early September that the money Portland is receiving from settlements to the national opioid lawsuits be used for: a. a needle buy-back program; b. a day space for homeless in need of shelter, laundry, showers, and social services as well as meals, and c. an on-peninsula methadone clinic. I would prefer to see that money be entirely devoted to recovery from substance use disorder, paying for detox beds, and helping to pay for sober housing following detox. But all of the proposed uses, including a day space that could beneficially help a person with substance use disorder on a path toward recovery, is an improvement on the present."

Catherine Nekoie:

"I look forward to learning more and more about programs and initiatives that would support and address this issue in my district."

Robert O'Brien:

"I think you were right to describe this crisis as impacting the state of Maine (and in reality, it's a national and international crisis). At the local city level, I think the role City Councilors play is in supporting harm-reduction efforts: making Narcan available and training more people on how to administer it, and supporting the clean-needle exchange program. I do think the public schools' case workers for at-risk youth are one intervention tool. I'm open to hearing more ideas, and I'm open to considering (and trialing) more approaches."

Wes Pelletier:

"As much as the right wing may say otherwise, the people suffering from opioid addiction are victims of large pharmaceutical companies who, facing little regulation, pushed the over-prescription of their highly addictive, dangerous products so that they could reap capital. With the payout from the resulting settlement, we now have access to funding that can hopefully help start to rebuild some of the lives, families, and communities that were shattered as a result of the epidemic. I would use these funds to create safe injection/ overdose prevention sites that would allow people to use in a safe way that would both give them access to resources that would help them kick, as well as reduce the amount of used needles in public spaces, which now polarize many folks in the public against poor folks."



How do you plan to incorporate the perspectives of people with lived experience of homelessness and poverty into your policymaking?

Atiim B Boykin:

"Yes! It's necessary and utmost important."

Nancy English:

"I would talk to people living on the street. In fact, after reading this question, I did that and heard support for the day space proposal mentioned in the previous question. I was also glad to hear that interactions with Portland Police officers for these particular people had been very positive, although an offer of help was, for the time being, declined. I am also friends with people in recovery, who spent time unhoused, and I rely on them to keep me in touch with what life can be like when you live on the streets."

Catherine Nekoie:

"An essential part of understanding the perspectives of people with lived experiences of homelessness and poverty is meeting with them and listening to their stories. This approach will guide me in developing policies that genuinely address the needs of the homeless community."

Robert O'Brien:

"I've served on the Portland school board and two separate charter commissions (that each examined the roles and duties of the mayor). Throughout my public service, I have always gone directly to the source to talk to those people most directly affected by a controversial new policy. I don't want to guess: I want to hear from the experts and those most experienced with the topic."

Wes Pelletier:

"As much as possible. So much of our government is built so that it excludes the voice of poor people, to the point where many don't even notice it. For the sake of democracy, it's vitally important that we find a way to make participating in important policy decisions equitable for all of our residents."

