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City Commissioner Dan Saltzman faces Mary Volm, Jesse Cornett at City Club debate

By Janie Har, The Oregonian

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Portland City Council candidates (from left) Dan Saltzman, Mary Volm and Jesse Cornett, debate at a City Club of Portland forum.

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman apologized for his lack of charisma at a City Club debate Friday but otherwise defended his three terms at City Hall.

Saltzman faces a slate of opponents on the May 18 primary ballot. He's come under fire for what critics call a lack of leadership at the Portland Police Bureau, and public frustration over city spending.

In his opening speech, he spelled out his time reforming the police and fire disability fund, correcting a billing fiasco at the Water Bureau, and keeping the "Big Pipe" sewer projects on time and under budget.

"The record shows I've become the go-to commissioner when it comes to solving the most difficult situations that come our way," he said.

He was joined at the debate by two of his seven active opponents: Jesse Cornett, one of the founders of the progressive Bus Project, and Mary Volm, a former city spokeswoman.

Neither has held elective office.

Volm described herself as the "go-to" person in her two decades working for the city, mostly in communications. If elected, she said, she would get back to basics, such as improving streets and creating jobs.

"Call me the maintenance girl, if you will; I know it's not very sexy, but we have

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turned our back on the billions of dollars of investment that you as citizens have made," she said.

Cornett, the only candidate to qualify for public campaign financing this year also would focus on basics, such as mental health services and more sidewalks. He is the first in his family to go to college and considered a career on a police force.

related story about how Saltzman is bearing the brunt of public frustration with City Hall.

"I've worked to open the doors of government, and I'm going to do the same at City Hall," he said.

Of the three, Volm trails in campaign money, with \$21,000 raised this year. Cornett qualified for \$150,000 in public money. Saltzman has raised about \$115,000 this year, much of it from well-established business and civic leaders.

Saltzman consistently cited throughout the debate his efforts to fight domestic violence and child abuse.

On police, Saltzman and Cornett agreed that officers should be tested for drugs and receive annual performance reviews. Volm criticized Cornett for what she fears is an "undercurrent of retaliation" on his part, after his friend, Raymond Gwerder, was shot by police in 2005.

On sit-lie regulations, Saltzman said he supports the City Council's efforts to regulate sidewalk use. He backs police enforcement against people who commit crimes downtown.

Volm said she wants the city to better work with organizations to provide services to the mentally ill and homes to people. Cornett said the current sidewalk approach in City Hall needs to be more "compassionate."

Volm, who served as spokeswoman for the first failed campaign to recall Mayor Sam Adams, was asked how she would work with him, if elected.

"This is not personal," Volm said. "As long as he and I both agree that we're working for the benefit of the citizens of Portland, I don't see any problem working directly with Sam."

Saltzman defended the council's decision to spend sewer savings on the mayor's bicycle plan. He said as sewer commissioner, he will make sure that sewer money goes to stop flooding homes first, and to benefit bicyclists second.

Cornett said he supports bioswales and bikes, but would not have muddied the two issues in the middle of the budget cycle. "What you do is you vex voters and you get 'green streets' where you need bike lanes, not where you need green streets," he said.

About 150 showed up for the debate at the Governor Hotel. In the crowd was Ed Garren, another council candidate who was not invited to debate. The City Club limits debates to three people.

Longtime City Club member Joella Werlin, 72, said she was intrigued by Cornett -- unknown to her until Friday -- and appreciated Volm's strength.

"But she seemed to me to be a little edgy, a little brittle, and that worried me," Werlin said.

"And Dan, who does lack charisma, nonetheless came across as very competent, very solid. So even though I think it's time for some change in the city, I'm not so sure I'm going to move for change."

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