



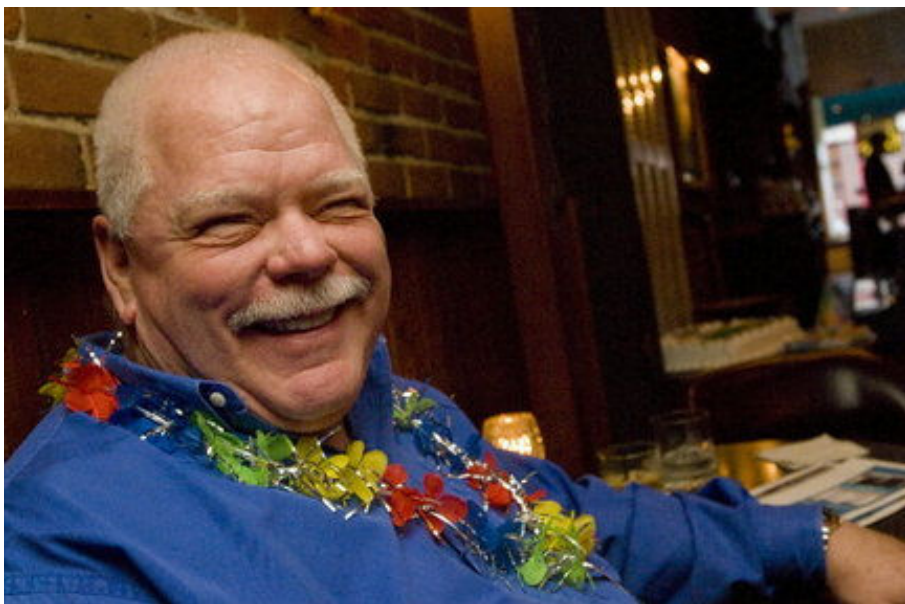
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## Inviting all to Portland City Council candidates' debates doesn't educate voters

By Anna Griffin, The Oregonian

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Ed Garren, a candidate for Portland City Council, at his 60th birthday party at the Hobo last year. Garren has demanded a spot in a City Club debate to no avail.

Ed Garren makes a reasonable point.

The **psychotherapist and Portland City Council candidate** is furious at the **City Club of Portland** for declining him a spot in this week's debate for the seat currently held by **Commissioner Dan Saltzman**. For several weeks, he peppered the nonprofit's leaders, other candidates and reporters with emails demanding a spot on the Governor Hotel stage alongside Saltzman and fellow candidates **Jesse Cornett** and **Mary Volm**.

"Am I to presume that the City Club is an elitist organization, or are you simply part of the political status quo, closed to 'outsiders,' that has helped create the problems that are burgeoning in our city?" he asked in an April 8 letter.

The problem: Viability is a matter of perspective. And sometimes doing what seems fair to everyone actually gets in the way of educating voters.

Garren is a good guy, affable, smart and engaged, particularly on the debate about a new Columbia River Crossing and the impact a replacement bridge could make on Hayden Island, where he lives.

But he can't win, at least not this time.

In a dream world, being affable, smart and engaged would be enough to become a viable candidate for public office. That isn't our world. The only candidates who stand a snowball's chance on election day in Portland are those who can afford to get their message out, through advertisements, mailers, lawn signs and door-to-door campaigning. Simply appearing on the ballot and in the voter's guide isn't enough.

"We complain that the biggest problem in politics is that money influences everything," Garren said. "If we want genuine change, it would behoove us to elect people outside that box, or at least give them a longer look."

On principle, he's right. Money plays too large a role in our political process. Donations buy influence, or at least access.

And yet, governing is a heck of a lot harder than getting elected. You need serious organizational skills, the ability to convince people you're right, experience in forming coalitions. In that sense, the quest for cash and volunteers is an important test. Nobodies accomplish nothing. Even the idealists at City Hall recognize this: To **qualify for taxpayer financing**, candidates must show a modicum of public support and organizational skill by collecting \$5 contributions and signatures from 1,000 people.

The City Club goes through this debate every local election cycle because crowded ballots are a Portland tradition. Nine people want Saltzman's seat this year. Twelve people ran for mayor two years ago. Some groups in town offer everyone whose name appears in your mailbox to speak. Those are invariably the least informative forums or debates; there's no give and take between candidates, no time for in-depth questions to make sure an idea is as good as it might sound at first blush.

To be fair, City Club debates can be just as boring and unenlightening depending on the candidates, the format and the questions asked. But limiting the number of participants to those who really and truly have a shot at winning allows for a more natural back-and-forth. It gives the moderator a chance to ask follow up questions, to go beyond sound bites. That's important given the sheer number of people City Club debates -- broadcast on TV and radio -- reach compared to, say, events sponsored by neighborhood associations. (**The League of Women Voters** invites all candidates to its events, which are rebroadcast on local public access.)

"We want to be as educational as possible," said Charity Fain, the City Club's executive director. "Mr. Garren sent us a lot information explaining why he would be a good addition, why he believes he's qualified. But that's not the question we ask. We're not looking at how qualified the person is. We're looking at how viable they are as a candidate."

They rely heavily on three things: polling, fundraising and name identification. In that regard, the three candidates they selected make the grade: Saltzman is the incumbent. Cornett qualified for public financing. Volm spent two decades as the city's public face during snowstorms and other emergencies.

Garren does not. He's lived in Portland only a few years. He started work to qualify for public financing for this race, then stopped. In his letters to City Club, he notes that in his previous City Council campaign, he collected almost 7,000 votes. That's true, but he omits the fact that he finished last among five candidates in 2008, with 4 percent of total votes cast.

I agree with the City Club's decision, but I'm also glad Garren fought the good fight. This is the challenge facing all of us who help serve as conduits between candidates and voters, the question we need to ask ourselves every election season to keep from becoming too arrogant about the role we play: We say somebody like Garren can't win. This time around, he can't. But how does an unknown become known if we never give them a spot on the stage?

"At least I know I'm going to get more votes this time than the last time," he says. "After that, maybe I'll be considered viable. Maybe not. I don't really know what 'viable' means at this point."

-- **Anna Griffin**

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