

# PortlandTribune

## Council race tests city's mood

*May election will show if voters are truly upset with Portland's direction*

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

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**It isn't the best of times, and it isn't the worst – that's longtime pollster Tim Hibbitts' assessment of the political climate in Portland today.**

As Portland voters receive their ballots in the mail next week for the May 18 primary election, Hibbitts believes it's that climate that will drive voters to either re-elect Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman for a fourth term or to look for change with one of his seven challengers.

"Except during tough times or when an incumbent gets himself or herself into trouble, the odds favor the incumbent to win," says Hibbitts, a partner in the opinion research firm Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall Inc. who is remaining neutral in the race.

"These are not the best of times in Portland, so that does provide somewhat of an opening for others. These are also not the worst of times. Portland is more upbeat about its (economic) situation than other areas."

In other words, it all comes down to the question: If voters are indeed upset with the city's current leadership, spending priorities and recent police oversight, as Saltzman's challengers charge, will they display their anger via their ballots or will they succumb to apathy?

Former city spokeswoman Mary Volm, one of the two leading challengers in the race, says she is worried about voter apathy. "It's the reason the (Mayor Sam Adams) recall is not going to go forward, and the reason Saltzman could get re-elected," she concedes.

Fellow challenger Jesse Cornett, who got his start in politics mobilizing young people to vote, also has seen a veil of apathy along the campaign trail.

"People haven't been as upset with their City Hall as other cities," he says. "We're Portland – a nice, patient bunch. There's not a bunch of angst."

"Hopefully," he adds, "there will be more anti-incumbent sentiment stirred up."

That's exactly what the slate of eight challengers to Saltzman have been trying to do for the past four months. (Three people have filed to run against Commissioner Nick Fish, none of whom has amassed a serious cache of money or much name recognition.)

Volm, a passionate and outspoken Southeast Portland artist by trade, brings name recognition from 20 years as the TV face of the city in weather-related emergencies. She also knows the budget like the back of her hand, as the longtime spokeswoman for the transportation bureau and Office of Management and Finance until last year.

No matter how deep her experience, however, Volm must raise funds to get her name and platform out to the entire electorate during the next three weeks, since she failed to gather 1,000 signatures and accompanying \$5 checks from voters to qualify her for public financing.



JAIME VALDEZ / TRIBUNE PHOTO  
City Commissioner Dan Saltzman (left) debates before the City Club of Portland last week. Faced with a slate of eight challengers, Saltzman says this is his toughest re-election campaign yet.

Being a woman in the historically male-dominated City Hall race may give her a boost, Hibbitts says, but not enough to bank on.

Volm says that's not a problem, since she's used to getting the word out "with a megaphone and a box of color crayons," if not a plethora of lawn signs, flyers and media ads.

### **Grassroots friends**

Cornett, a Portland State University graduate who went on to work for the PSU president's office and lobby for university funding in Salem, lives in Lents and has had a steep learning curve in politics.

He lost a state Senate race to Rod Monroe in May 2006 by a narrow margin, but in February became the only one of Saltzman's challengers to qualify for public financing – an early signal of his deep networks and ability to reach a large swath of the public.

With the public financing came public scrutiny, since the city's Voter-Owned Election law is headed to the ballot for a public vote in November.

Cornett still has about half of his \$150,000 to spend in the final weeks of the race, and recently decided to use \$57,000 of it to pay 20 canvassers to knock on voters' doors.

While his challengers gave him grief about that – asking why he isn't asking his friends from the Oregon Bus Project to volunteer to canvass for free – Cornett says it's a legitimate way to supplement his grassroots campaign.

"I'm not running against something; I'm running for something," he says. We have a great city. We're resting on our laurels."

Both he and Volm believe they can either win outright or force Saltzman into a runoff in May by keeping the incumbent under the 50 percent threshold needed to win.

Hibbitts says he'll be watching closely to see if that happens, and just how close the split is. If there's a gap of 10 to 12 percentage points or less in May, "it's a pretty live race" in the November general election, he says. But he believes a margin any larger is much harder to overcome.

While more voters turn out in November, he says, "the problem is when you're that far behind, it puts the pressure on you to gather all the voters who support the other candidates and do reasonably well with the new voters. Is it impossible? No. But is it extremely unlikely? Yes."

That's the downside of having lots of challengers to an incumbent, he says: a fractured anti-incumbent vote.

Besides the general city climate, Hibbitts says, two other key factors typically determine a race: the performance of the incumbent, and how effective the challengers are at running a campaign.

### **Foibles and pet projects**

Depending on who you ask, Saltzman has either been all that's good or all that's wrong with the City Council.

While he touts himself as an independent problem-solver who "keeps an eye on the bottom line" with projects such as the Big Pipe and reform of the Fire & Police Disability & Retirement Fund, his opponents paint him as the picture of "back-room deals" and the status quo.

They fault him for being the crucial third vote on controversial deals such as Major League Soccer – which they point to as a glaring example of the city straying from its core missives.

Cornett has labeled it one of the city's biggest recent "foibles," along with allocating \$20 million in Bureau of Environmental Services funds to create "green streets," with sewer and stormwater upgrades, along designated bike boulevards over the next three years.

Saltzman says it's just wise planning. Volm is opposed to expanding bike lanes while core city needs – including potholes and sidewalks – go unfunded. And Cornett says it was the green streets/bike plan process that most concerns him.

The biggest target on Saltzman's back, however, has been the Police Bureau, which Adams handed him

a year and a half ago. During recent police shootings and discipline-related incidents, Volm and Cornett have faulted Saltzman for backing down to the police union and for accepting the bureau assignment in the first place.

Both Cornett and Volm also criticize Saltzman's devotion to the Portland Children's Levy and other initiatives focused on elder abuse, child abuse and domestic violence. They call these social services Saltzman's "pet projects" and say they are more in the county's purview than the city's. They further argue that this emphasis on social services distracts from the areas that should be the city's core focus – such as water, sewers, transportation and jobs.

At the recent Portland City Club debate, Saltzman was clearly ready for that accusation. He said that while the children's levy and his other proposals might not be the city's direct responsibility, "someone's got to do it."

"I'm the one that cares about the soul of the city, the well-being of our families and youth, in addition to transportation and infrastructure," he said.

Saltzman said his latest interest is working with Multnomah County to create safe houses for young girls vulnerable to human trafficking, since Portland is a global hotspot for that crime.

Rather than offer a rebuttal to Saltzman's response, Cornett offered a rare heartfelt thanks at the City Club appearance: "Thank you for the work you've done," he told Saltzman.

When Saltzman pressed him to name another pet project besides the soccer deal, Cornett simply answered: "Thank you for your efforts."

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## **MARY VOLM**

**Family:** Adult son, a Portland attorney

**Drove to work today:** Vespa. Also uses her 2000 Saturn Wagon in heavy rain.

**Latest book read:** "How We Decide," by Jonah Lehrer

**Favorite sport in school and now:** Gymnastics then, tennis now

**Worst vice:** Chocolate

**Biggest hero:** Rosa Parks

**Website:** [www.maryvolmforportland.com](http://www.maryvolmforportland.com)

## **JESSE CORNETT**

**Family:** Wife, Molly Aleshire, program consultant for a Clackamas County education program

**Drove to work today:** Biodiesel operated Jetta TDI

**Latest book read:** State of Black Oregon report by the Urban League of Portland

**Favorite sport in school and now:** Baseball then, baseball and college basketball now

**Worst vice:** Food and drink

**Biggest hero:** Ironman (the May 7 release of Ironman 2 will be an officially sanctioned campaign event)

**Website:** [www.jessecornett.com](http://www.jessecornett.com)

## **DAN SALTZMAN**

**Family:** Girlfriend, Liz Burns, development specialist at a North Portland nonprofit; daughter, a sophomore at University of Oregon

**Drove to work today:** 2006 Toyota Highlander Hybrid

**Latest book read:** Winston Churchill's "The Second World War"

**Favorite sport in school and now:** wrestling then, college basketball now

**Worst vice:** "Too much network TV news (not Fox)"

**Biggest hero:** Martin Luther King, Jr.

**Website:** [www.dansaltzman.com](http://www.dansaltzman.com)

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