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Chair Jessica Vega Pederson's prepared 2023 State of Multnomah County Address

(Delivered at the Franklin High School Theater, 5 p.m. May 9, 2023 in Portland. Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero delivered welcoming remarks. Bobbie Regan of the City Club of Portland introduced the Chair. Chabre Vickers of Prosper Portland moderated a Q & A immediately after. [You can watch a video of the Chair Vega Pederson's State of the County here.](#))

I want to begin by thanking Portland Public Schools and the Franklin school community for the opportunity to be in your beautiful theater and to join you tonight to talk about our shared priorities.

This is the first in-person State of the County in three years and I am thrilled it is hosted in this stunning, updated PPS high school – one of the first to be modernized with the 2012 School Building Improvement Bond.

Franklin High School, like all of our schools, is full of promise, learning, enrichment and empowerment. And this building has already seen this community through difficult times.

We have an opportunity tonight to be this strong school community while we're rebuilding and remaking our commitments following the COVID-19 pandemic.

All of the students at Franklin have been impacted by these times. As have all students and families across Multnomah County.

You've worked through the difficulties of online instruction and social isolation. Many of your families have struggled. I know the impacts of these disruptions and appreciate your resilience and perseverance.

And to the teachers and school administrators who've been tireless in supporting students and families, I want you to know how much we see you. How much we appreciate you. How valuable your commitment is and will continue to be.

Thank you to the Franklin student body, Principal Frazier, and your staff. Thank you Superintendent Guerrero and your staff for your generous support of Multnomah County in hosting today's event and in our many collaborations.

Thanks also to City Club of Portland, a longtime partner to Multnomah County in helping to host and produce our State of the County event.

I appreciate you joining us again this year – in a new venue, with a new format – to bring people together tonight.

Appreciation for Commissioners Sharon Meieran, Susheela Jayapal, Diane Rosenbaum and Lori Stegmann for joining me for tonight's event and to Chabre Vickers for being our moderator.

And thanks to this audience, filled with young people and families, so many employees of Multnomah County are here tonight, colleagues from other jurisdictions, representatives from community-based organizations and members of the public who've joined us in person or via livestream to learn more about Multnomah County at this pivotal time.

The State of the County is one of the few times the community is gathered in such a large forum to consider *who we are and who we can be* at this moment in our history.

It follows weeks of intense work at Multnomah County to create a county budget: reviewing budget priorities, engaging community, hearing from our departments, all to create the Chair's Executive Budget. As a Board, we are now holding public briefings and connecting more deeply with the community around our specific priorities for this next fiscal year.

I hope you'll consider joining us for one of our upcoming community budget hearings, taking place this year virtually, in person and in a hybrid format on the evenings of May 10, 17 and 31st.

Your voices are needed in our work and reflected in our investments.

Because as we emerge from the pandemic into a city remade by social unrest, homelessness, economic disparity and disconnection, we have an increasing need for a social fabric that cares for the most vulnerable.

That's what Multnomah County does: cares for the most vulnerable with integrity and commitment.

And that's what you do alongside us in every way that you're connected to your communities and our shared work.

Through this work, I know that a more just recovery is possible and *more justice is possible*.

Because justice starts in the ways we connect with each other to co-create a safety net that ensures everyone has *what they need to live, rise and thrive*.

This is a time of transition and possibility, with major changes in leadership across the State, the region and Multnomah County.

We meet 2023 with new learnings and opportunities resulting from changes that have taken place since the pandemic began. I see these changes as mandates to reset our priorities and our partnerships.

When I ran for this office, my priorities were grounded in my strong belief in the importance of giving everyone an opportunity to succeed.

A fair chance to live, rise and thrive.

This chance starts at the very beginning of our lives - with investments in strong family connections, in an education that supports the whole person, in a community that respects and reflects who you are.

A fair chance means you have the basic needs of safety, shelter, health, clean air and water, and opportunities for a fair wage and an equitable workplace.

In our world today, that's not always possible – *but I believe it should be*.

We live in a country where income inequality is the highest it's been in decades. Where gun-violence has overtaken car accidents as the number one killer of young people. Where life expectancy - along with birth rates - are falling.

I agree with Superintendent Guerrero that we have a “children and family crisis” that we must work together to solve. Which is one of the many reasons I am so proud of the partnership between Multnomah County and Portland Public Schools.

I know those of you living right here in the Franklin school community have dealt with these issues first-hand, including recent acts of community violence.

I know this all too well myself – as the mom of teenagers living in the same house in the Hazelwood neighborhood in East Portland for nearly 20 years.

And this is a special population for me as a proud Latina, one of four dual Spanish immersion programs in the PPS high school system.

This community is made up of students from families across a wide area of Southeast Portland that was part of District 3, where I served as Commissioner for six years.

I can tell you that I loved representing you as a County Commissioner just as much as I love this chance to represent you as your Chair.

Because one of the things I know is that your situation and access to these things you need should be the same no matter which zip code you live in or what neighborhood you call home.

That is why the investments in my proposed \$3.5 billion Fiscal Year 2024 budget are designed to help us continue our regional recovery from the pandemic and shore up the systems we need to build the future everyone in Multnomah County deserves.

The complex issues we face demand bold and collaborative leadership that brings our community together to solve big problems.

And we'll do that best through partnership – not just around our investments for this next fiscal year but in the ways we make good on those investments.

Regional and jurisdictional coordination is more important than ever, especially in our work to address homelessness, behavioral health, economic and climate justice and community safety.

For too long, we've been having a conversation in individual jurisdictions that is not serving our needs or the needs of community-members.

People who live in this community shouldn't be asked to consider whose jurisdiction their problem falls under or who's responsible for helping them solve it.

Instead, our individual governments must work closely as partners to focus on our shared priorities and values and collaboratively to recognize the leadership inherent in the communities we serve.

This year's proposed budget takes that into consideration, bringing forward new partnerships and continuing to support connections to our community that have been a cornerstone of our work for years.

An example is how we're setting up our new regional retail and auto theft task force through Multnomah County's District Attorney's office.

Since 2019 we've been experiencing a historic 68 percent increase in auto thefts, with an 80 percent increase in case referrals to the DA.

To capitalize on good work already being done, Multnomah County and the City of Portland are co-funding this theft task force to place two new DA directly inside police precincts.

Retail and auto theft rings will be investigated using coordinated efforts across law enforcement teams, investigation units, and jurisdictions.

We'll take a regional approach to this problem, so every jurisdiction is involved and bringing their best practices and resources to the table.

And when people ask what my plan for homelessness is, every strategy, program and initiative is rooted in partnership, accountability and urgency to meet this moment.

We all know that too many of our neighbors in Multnomah County are living on the streets without shelter and the services needed to stabilize and address basic needs and behavioral health challenges.

Without a pathway to supportive, long-term housing or with housing instability, living at risk each month of losing their homes.

Portland is 24th in the nation for the rate of homelessness among cities with over 100,000 people, accounting for a quarter of the homeless population in Oregon.

This takes a toll across the region, which is why we're working in close partnership with the City of Portland, the State of Oregon, emergency management and regional jurisdictional partners as a Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) group focused on reducing unsheltered homelessness.

This MAC group will coordinate an infusion of Supportive Housing Services and state dollars to follow through on our "Housing Multnomah Now," initiative.

Led by the Joint Office through the MAC group, this is a bold \$32 million, 12-month plan to unify local and state efforts to reduce unsheltered homelessness starting in Portland's central city.

It's the solution our community needs now – the one that will move those living unsheltered in a specific geographic area directly into supportive housing.

This program uses a by-name list and a targeted timeline to provide options, support and a path connecting people directly to housing so we stop the shuffle of moving people from one location to another as they're living outside.

We are close to confirming our first geographic site in the central city. From there, Housing Multnomah Now will expand to helping those unhoused in East County.

This combined investment will rehouse 545 households and create 140 shelter beds by the end of this year.

Our plan includes incentives for landlords to increase available housing, guaranteed rental subsidies, and stability-focused wraparound services to help keep people housed long-term.

And Housing Multnomah Now's focus on housing placement supports and strengthens our shelter system.

Funding devoted to this effort will *help limit the length of stay in all shelters* by eliminating bottlenecks that keep people from being housed.

Which means we'll make better use of the beds we already have, and provide safe sleep options for more people in a time when they need them most.

Overall we're investing \$128 million dollars for housing placements, rent assistance and support services to meet those experiencing homelessness on the streets, in vehicles, in shelter beds – and assist them to move into permanent housing and help them stay there.

And we're investing \$87 million in strategies that provide safety on and off the streets in alternative shelter, motel-based shelter and vital outreach on the ground every day.

Should all beds come online as budgeted and predicted — including all beds funded through other sources — this will support more than 2,500 beds of year-round shelter with wraparound services this calendar year.

But all of the work to address unsheltered homelessness depends on knowing who is in need of shelter, services and permanent housing.

It depends on good data.

Creating the data that helps us track, inform and hold ourselves accountable was JOB #1 when I took office in January.

Even before announcing “Housing Multnomah Now,” my team began to convene a regional systems-data task force to increase our accuracy and accountability.

These long overdue steps will give the public new, accessible, consistent information, as well as expectations around how we're serving those living on our streets and spending vital taxpayer funds.

This includes sustained work with the Built for Zero initiative, part of an ongoing effort to build systems transformation into the ways we collect, use and disseminate information.

Improved data collection and reporting will enable the Joint Office to prioritize resources, test investments in the system and understand whether its efforts are truly helping solve chronic homelessness.

All of these initiatives are key to meeting the urgency of this moment, increasing our ability to partner with the city and the state in building on the states of emergency declared by both.

Because the people living unhoused in Multnomah County can't wait.

And the work we're doing to support those in need connects the dots inside of the lives of individual people.

We're thrilled to have one of these individuals with us today in this audience. As we continue to engage people with lived expertise in our work to address homelessness, it's people like Doll Crain who inspire me.

After growing up in Portland and raising her two sons here, domestic violence led to Doll losing housing and spending four years without stable housing or a place to call home.

She spent time living in an RV, worked the sugar beet harvest in North Dakota and returned to Oregon to live camping and unsheltered near 1,000 Acres and the Sandy river.

Doll generally had a good experience with law enforcement and was finally able to stabilize through an opportunity to join Multnomah County's partner, Cultivate Initiatives, to develop their internship program, overseeing work funded through the Joint Office to connect with young community-members volunteering their time to support our homeless population.

Doll, you are an inspiration and I'm so grateful to have you with us tonight and in stable, permanent housing for the long-term.

Multnomah County's budget and priorities are not built in a silo.

They're built alongside many jurisdictional and community partners who share these investments.

Because our county is built *as much by the community members who call Multnomah County home* as for them.

Which is why we've looked across the board at how we can be a more inclusive, equitable, thoughtful partner.

While no single budget, plan or program can eradicate the interconnected root causes that contribute to community crises, I know Multnomah County has a meaningful leadership role to play.

To aid this, we're boosting pay for critical human service providers to address workforce and capacity issues.

These are partners providing shelter services, outreach, and assistance for seniors, youth, and families.

This investment recognizes how vital – and challenging – this work is and responds with \$1.5 million dollars for a 3 percent increase in wages, along with more than \$500,000 to stabilize partnerships and contracts.

And as we take care of people, we must support our animal shelter more fully, too. In response to a need for stabilization, we're bringing on a much-needed 31 percent increase in animal care staffing.

This increased funding will also facilitate the completion of a systems-based overhaul both for the people who work in our shelter and the animals who need and deserve the best care available.

We're investing \$3 million dollars across departments in gun-violence prevention, continuing upstream support and downstream intervention to help keep communities safe.

We're committed as a county to family stabilization efforts and resource-building to address the root causes and break cycles of violence.

More than ever before, we're taking a "one-county" approach to our community safety investments, spreading them across the Department of Community Justice, the DA, the Sheriff, the Department of Human Services, and the Health Department.

This approach will have the most impact on the underlying causes that lead to community violence and behavioral health struggles.

And in response to the voter's mandate to convert to ranked-choice voting by 2026, we're making sure Multnomah County Elections has the resources for implementation – with a close to \$1 million dollar investment in elections infrastructure and expanded voter outreach and engagement.

And we're creating more capacity to connect people to immediate services when they need them most.

This includes \$2.5 million dollars for daily operations at the Behavioral Health Resource Center, including 33 new shelter beds and 19 bridge housing beds this spring.

The critical work at the BHRC meets a vital need in our community for behavioral health stabilization.

But the BHRC's programs are just one piece of a system-wide puzzle.

Which is why we're also investing in new capacity to support community members stabilizing from acute intoxication, with \$2 million new dollars for our Behavioral Health Emergency Coordination Network.

And we're committed to supporting youth and families in so many ways.

One is prioritizing upstream mental and behavioral health supports in 38 school-based mental health sites across six school districts, including six that are culturally specific and eleven throughout Portland Public Schools.

We're also pleased to house five of our nine student health centers in PPS – including a great one *right here at Franklin* – providing acute and preventative care to students in need.

And this year's proposed budget expands the pool of bilingual, bicultural mental health providers with a pipeline that pairs interns with Youth Engagement Specialists in afterschool programs for middle and high schoolers in 13 schools.

We also looked at the entire lifecycle of the school day, especially with SUN Community Schools, Multnomah County's after-school programs.

These enriching programs – many of them culturally specific or offered in partnership with culturally responsive organizations – support healthy development and increase family stability.

Our commitment to SUN this year supports a request for proposal process to re-engage many SUN School providers and improve service hubs.

And we're allocating \$250,000 to maintain four existing SUN School sites that could otherwise shutter, as well as making investments in an updated SUN database and expansion of our summer meals program.

Our summer programs will continue, too, with 41 participating sites at nearly every neighborhood in Multnomah County.

[PAUSE]

As Superintendent Guerrero brought up as well, there's so much to be excited about with Preschool for All.

Because we know our investments in early childhood education pay this community back many times over in educational achievement and stability, with every \$1 spent today resulting in \$7 in future savings.

We passed a measure in 2020 – by a wide margin – to fund Multnomah County's universal preschool program, which is already serving more than 700 families this school year.

And in this proposed budget, we'll be doubling our number of available preschool slots in the 2023-24 school year, offering 1,400 that go on a priority basis to those families we can impact the most.

If you're interested, you can apply now for a spot this fall! Families choose up to six participating preschools, including in centers, schools, or licensed home-based care. Applications will remain open until May 31 and open again for waitlist spots on a rolling basis in the summer.

The fact that Multnomah County has made an investment upstream to prioritize universal preschool by 2030 creates a two-generation solution that we're already seeing pay dividends.

One example of this two-generational solution comes to us from Marilyn Cha and her family – including 4-year-old daughter Camilla – who are here in the audience with us tonight. When we asked about their experience with Preschool for All, mom Marilyn told us:

As our daughter was getting older, we wanted to enroll her in preschool. We visited preschools and were provided quotes and found ourselves astonished by the high rates. We were very fortunate that the opportunity to attend Ladybug Academy came up and we applied because otherwise how would we have done it? We were very happy when we were one of the applicants selected.

I love that my daughter is getting the necessary education and being sociable. Being an only child, we worried that she was going to have issues socializing with peers. That has not been the case. She enjoys going to school and can't wait to see her friends every day.

Having her enroll has meant everything for me and my family. It has helped my husband and I with our work and helped develop my daughter educationally. This has been a success and we're looking forward to re-enrolling her into next year as well.

This is what universal preschool is all about. It helps parents with their work. It helps bright, vibrant kids who might not otherwise have this chance meet their peers, socialize and develop educationally.

These families – their dreams and progress – are worth our investment and I'm so glad we're making it.

It was also a priority for me to add more than \$17 million dollars of capital to the Preschool for All Facilities Fund to help build infrastructure to make sure we can deliver on this promise.

These dollars fund infrastructure projects for home-based providers, child care centers, non-profit organizations, and school districts.

We're also thoughtful of who benefits from these investments. Providers who have had the least access to capital will be prioritized with a focus on Black, Indigenous, and Providers of Color.

We know this investment in preschool opportunities will create social, emotional and educational impact that can change what's possible in the lives of our graduating class of 2040 and beyond.

In coming in to the role of County Chair, the work that I need to lead internally at our organization is just as important to me as the work that I am leading externally.

I want to make sure Multnomah County is an employer of choice for our 5,500 current employees and the many job-seekers throughout this region.

That means our ways of supporting, serving and collaborating with our colleagues must be equitable and responsive.

This year, we deepened the way we infused equity into our budgeting process, using an equity and empowerment lens that helps us analyze the root causes of racial disparities, shift the way we make decisions to center equity, and align our work more fully with our values.

We also employed a budget equity tool for the first time that required that each investment demonstrate alignment with equity and inclusion values and initiatives.

And we're adding resources through a new position in our Office of Diversity and Equity to further Multnomah County's Workforce Equity Strategic Plan.

Substantial Workforce Equity investments continue this year as we revise our strategic plan – especially to increase feedback, culturally specific leadership development and more equitable onboarding and training.

We're also re-visioning Multnomah County's Mission, Vision and Values by engaging employees and partners from across the county to revise these foundational ideas for the first time in over a decade.

These are vehicles for progress toward an organizational culture that prioritizes more safety, trust, belonging and respect.

Plus, we're keeping up with the technology needs of today by modernizing our IT and data tracking, putting a down payment on a website redesign, and increasing infrastructure for Future of Work needs.

We know our workforce is changing, with 40 percent of the 5500 county employees at all levels coming from BIPOC communities – including manager and director levels that used to have much less diversity.

I'm committed to making sure we're deepening our engagement and responsiveness with all Multnomah County employees so our workforce is truly supported to thrive, too.

And we continue to deepen engagement in community-led spaces.

The past few weekends, I've had the pleasure of attending work sessions – at the June Key Delta Center and PCC Cascade Campus – to consider next steps around environmental and economic justice.

These rooms were filled with community partners and advocates.

They were also filled with thoughtful engagement, great questions, and strategic partnership from representatives of the very communities any plan we co-create will most impact.

I'm excited to see the ways we're looking together with fresh eyes at these convenings.

Because we're looking not only at the processes we use to develop strategic plans. We're listening to community insights to better understand what is needed, where our gaps are, and how Multnomah County can be the best partner in our shared work to fill them.

Inside each investment we make to build Multnomah County from here, we commit to true engagement as listeners, conveners, and collaborators.

Because an equitable recovery is not possible until the community is engaged at every level of our work.

And you are a part of that community.

An equitable recovery is more possible because we are in this work together.

Tonight, I want to thank each of you in this room. Each of you joining us via livestream. Each of you focused on how to shape our county, now and into the future.

Thank you again to Franklin High School and Principal Frazier, Portland Public School and Superintendent Guerrero and Portland City Club and the City Club of Portland board for being incredible partners in helping us bring the State of the County to this very special community space with all of you.

There's not a person joining us tonight who doesn't have an opportunity, as much as any of us do, to lift up your community.

I appreciate the work you're already doing, and I hope in response to community needs and investment, you'll be inspired to do even more.

I look forward to the coming year, as each day provides us with new chances to make a bigger difference – and to do it together.

Now I'm pleased to welcome moderator Chabre Vickers to the stage to join me for the QA portion of the event. We'll start with a conversation between the two of us and then open it up for a few questions from the audience.