

# Councilor Ray: Portland ballot initiatives won't accomplish what they claim

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By Belinda Ray  
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I've voted in favor of citizen initiatives in the past: ranked-choice voting, marijuana legalization and protections for Portland's parks. But this year, I am voting "no" on municipal Questions A-E. Here's why.

Though well intentioned, these referenda will not accomplish what they claim. They will, in fact, do the opposite: make it more difficult to develop affordable housing; lead to job losses and local business shutdowns, and make it harder for the city to enact its plans to combat climate change. Let's take them one by one.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Belinda Ray** represents District 1 on the Portland City Council.

If Question A simply raised the minimum wage to \$15 an hour over the next few years, I'd be all in. But it doesn't. Over time, it raises the current minimum wage from \$12 an hour to \$22.50 an hour during declared emergencies (like the current pandemic). This increase applies to all employees, regardless of occupation, unless they are able to work exclusively from home. So as of Jan. 1, 2022, if an emergency proclamation is in effect, the minimum wage for employees in Portland would be \$19.50 an hour: a 63 percent jump from the current rate. Increasing employees' wages so dramatically in such a short time would lead to layoffs and shutdowns. That won't help anyone.

Question B is redundant. The council passed a facial recognition technology ban in August. The only difference between what the council passed and Question B is that Question B contains problematic enforcement language that conflicts with state law and places the city in a precarious legal situation.

Question C purports to enact a Green New Deal, making buildings more energy efficient and housing more affordable. It will do neither. Instead, it will make it more difficult for public and private agencies to build low- and moderate-income housing in Portland by limiting their ability to earn essential state credits and matching funds. Units developed by

Avesta, Portland Housing Authority and Community Housing of Maine – or like those at the former Adams School on Munjoy Hill – won't be possible with these restrictions in place.

Question C also undermines the climate action plan jointly crafted by the cities of Portland and South Portland. The cities' plan was created in a transparent process with robust public participation. Sadly, this "Green New Deal" demonstrates no knowledge of the work already underway or the best path forward. If passed, it will saddle the city with LEED standards –which are no longer considered the best way to ensure energy efficiency – for the next five years. It will also shift staff time away from enacting the climate action plan, focusing instead on nice-sounding busywork that will delay the city's progress toward goals already called for and endorsed by the council.

Question D claims to protect tenants, but: Rent control doesn't work. If it did, New York and San Francisco, which have substantive rent control programs, would be among the most affordable cities in which to live. They are not. And in fact, just about all of the most expensive cities in the U.S. have rent control programs (see the April 3, 2019, Freakonomics podcast episode, "Why Rent Control Doesn't Work").

Question E will make it hard, and in some cases impossible, for homeowners or tenants to earn income by occasionally renting their spaces. Portland already has strict regulations for short-term rentals. If Question E passes, renting a room in your home will require an annual \$1,000 registration fee, even if you rent only for a few nights each year. And tenants will no longer be able to rent out their apartments, even if their landlords give them permission.

The most troubling part of Questions A-E is that they were developed in a vacuum with no public process. Also, if passed, they can't be altered for five years (City Code, Chapter 9, Section 46), and the council can't change this rule.

As I said, I've supported citizen initiatives in the past and believe there is a place for them in our system of governance. But these referenda represent a poorly crafted set of ordinances with unintended and self-defeating consequences. No matter how passionately you feel about these issues, passing these referendum questions is not the right way to get this work done. Please join me in voting "no" on A-E.

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