

Kate Snyder says she wants to put service ahead of ambition as Portland mayor

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By Randy Billings Staff Writer

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Kathleen Snyder was the youngest of five children raised by a father who attended college on the GI bill and a mother who grew up poor.

“My mom would do things like wash off the tinfoil and reuse the baggies,” Snyder said. Her father constantly warned her about credit cards.

THE CANDIDATE

NAME: Kathleen (Kate) Merchant Snyder

AGE: 49

ADDRESS: 31 Kenwood Street

FAMILY: Married, three grown children

OCCUPATION: Executive director, Foundation for Portland Public Schools

EDUCATION: B.A. in Government and French, Skidmore College; Masters in Public Policy & Management, University of Southern Maine's Muskie School

POLITICAL/CIVIC EXPERIENCE: Portland Board of Public Education (2007-2013). Board of Directors: Jobs for Maine's Graduates and Portland Parks Conservancy. Nathan Clifford Elementary and King Middle School parent teacher organizations.

WEBSITE/SOCIAL MEDIA: www.kateformayor.me; www.instagram.com/kateformayor;

Those Depression-era values would come in handy decades later when Snyder joined the Portland School Board just as the district faced a \$2 million budget deficit and the Great Recession.

And, she says, they also would help her as Portland's full-time mayor, a job she hopes to win in next month's election.

"We really need to be careful with people's pocketbooks. I think I have a healthy respect for people's household capacity," she said.

Snyder is one of three candidates trying to unseat incumbent Ethan Strimling, 51, to become Portland's third popularly elected mayor since voters changed the position from a ceremonial mayor chosen each year by city councilors to a full-time position, with a salary of \$76,615 and a four-year term. City Councilor Spencer Thibodeau and waiter Travis Curran are also running.

Snyder, who served for six years on the school board and put her three children through Portland Public Schools, is running on a platform of collaboration with city councilors. She said she isn't "losing sleep" over the fact that five sitting councilors have endorsed Thibodeau. Snyder notes that City Councilor Kimberly Cook has endorsed her campaign and City Councilor Justin Costa has endorsed both her and Thibodeau.



Snyder said she respects Thibodeau, a 31-year-old real estate attorney, but she believes she has more life, professional and elected experience, combined with the perspective of an outsider. And Snyder said she's seeking the office out of a "commitment to public service."

"I really relish the work" said Snyder, 49. "I think we need somebody for whom the mayor's role is not about personal ambition but really just about the outcomes for Portland and the work and service for the city of Portland, and that's what I offer."

Snyder has raised roughly \$70,000 toward her campaign compared with Strimling's roughly \$150,000 and Thibodeau's \$90,000.

Snyder was born just outside of Cleveland and raised outside of Boston. She and her husband, Colin, moved to Portland in 1994 after spending nearly three years working in New York City. Her family would frequently visit Maine, where they eventually built a cottage on Drakes Island and would spend holidays there. So when they decided to move here, Portland was the obvious choice, she said.



Portland mayoral candidate Kate Snyder pauses to be photographed while campaigning door-to-door in the Libbytown neighborhood. She's running on a platform of collaboration with city councilors. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

More than a decade after moving, Snyder finished first in a five-way race to represent the entire city on the Portland School Board, ousting one incumbent despite having no previous elected experience. She was selected twice by her colleagues to chair the board and two other times to lead the board's Finance Committee. She did not seek a third term.

She joined the board in 2007, when the schools were under the microscope after a \$2 million budget deficit came to light. The district's top administrators had resigned, and the school's finances were taken over by the city. She continued to serve during the Great Recession, which included the loss of millions of dollars in state aid and a \$2.7 million midyear budget reduction. That forced the district to make tough decisions, which included pay cuts and layoffs.

"It was terrible, but we did what we had to do," Snyder said during a recent candidate forum hosted by the Back Cove Neighborhood Association.



Kate Snyder talks to Paige Clifton while campaigning door-to-door last month in Portland's Libbytown neighborhood, where several residents said they were ready for a change in City Hall. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

Snyder said in an interview that Portland's mayor should have experience dealing with difficult budgets, because she thinks the city is "headed into more challenging years."

Snyder said the city needs to find new sources of revenue to offset property taxes – something she has experience doing. She is currently the executive director of the Foundation for Portland Public Schools, a nonprofit that raises private money for the city's schools. She said the nonprofit has an agreement with the city school district, which pays her \$75,000 salary.

According to its annual report, the foundation provided \$100,000 for cultural activities through partnerships with Portland Stage, Portland Ovations, Portland Symphony Orchestra and the Portland Museum of Art during the 2019 fiscal year. It also provided \$35,000 in teacher grants and established a fund to help address food insecurity among public school students.

Snyder also is a founding board member of the Portland Parks Conservancy, a new nonprofit that is trying to raise private money to maintain and improve the city's open spaces, parks and playgrounds.

During the campaign, Snyder has talked about the need to balance "civic aspirations with capacity." She said the mayor, as the only full-time member of the council, has a unique opportunity to reach out to neighborhoods, with the help of district councilors, and find

areas of common concern. Those issues can be brought back to the council during the annual goal-setting session to ensure that the priorities of the community and the council line up.

Snyder said she also would work to support council committees, doing research and assembling a diverse range of content-area experts when necessary, to tackle complex issues like affordable housing or homelessness.

Snyder said she will continue the city's perennial push to get more revenue from the state, either through a fairer education formula or by opening up new revenue streams by getting state approval to assess a local option sales, or meals and lodging, tax. But she also thinks the mayor should be doing more to educate Portland residents about the fact the state is not meeting its obligation to fund 55 percent of education costs statewide.

On the issue of housing, she also would like the city to follow South Portland's lead when it comes to regulating short-term rentals, such as those advertised by Airbnb. South Portland prohibits most unhosted rentals, while Portland has capped its unhosted or non-owner occupied rentals at 400. And she said the city could make it easier for homeowners to make additional money and add more affordable housing by making it easier for people to add in-law apartments, also known as accessory dwelling units.

Rapid development continues to touch a raw nerve for many people in the city. Snyder said elected leaders need to be careful with how the city responds and not vilify developers, some of whom, such as the Community Housing of Maine, are doing good work. Other developers, she said, are essentially forced to build luxury housing because land is so expensive.

"I actually think having developers' voices at the table is a really constructive thing to do because to simply vilify them alienates them and it doesn't recognize the constraints they have to work in and how they can be part of the solution for the city of Portland," Snyder said.

Snyder supports the school system's comprehensive plan, Portland Promise, but says city and school leaders need to work more closely together to understand its impact on students and all city residents, since only about 20 percent of residents have children in schools. She said she's open-minded about cost-saving measures, including at the high school level, but she's not advocating for systemic changes.

On a late-September evening while going door to door to talk to voters, several residents in the Libbytown neighborhood said they were ready for a change in City Hall. Unprovoked, several people voiced displeasure with Strimling and concerns about property taxes being too high.

"We gotta get rid of that other guy," 75-year-old Dennis Moran said. "He just piles on, and he

doesn't get along with any of the current councilors. Hopefully things go well for you."

A few houses down, 67-year-old Robert Rohner had a similar view.

"I appreciate the new face and the new voice," he said.

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