

Unsung Hero: Nathan Smith, Community Advocate

By David Treadwell | May 20, 2013

The city's emergence over the last 25 years as one of the nation's most vibrant and livable cities is no accident. Visionary leaders saw what needed to be done, and they did it.

Nathan Smith, a commercial real estate attorney at Bernstein Shur, has been such a leader. To be sure, Smith is not "unsung" – he's won many awards acknowledging his tireless efforts on behalf of the city.



But he is a reminder that individuals with a passion and a purpose can make a huge difference in the life of a community. Moreover, it's helpful to step back and consider the question, "How did a city like Portland get to be a city like Portland?"

Space precludes a full description of the impact Smith has had in his various leadership roles: mayor, city councilor, president of the board of United Way, president and co-founder of Portland Trails, commissioner of the Maine State Housing Authority, and president of the Portland Public Library's board of trustees.

Smith's educational background in philosophy and law prepared him well for his role as a visionary pragmatist. His childhood summers in Maine instilled his love for the state and led him to eventually move to Portland.

He soon became involved in the United Way, where he began focusing on the need for affordable housing.

"We need feet on the streets at night," he said. "Affordable housing is key to sustaining the vitality of Portland."

As a city councilor, he helped draft the housing component of the city's Comprehensive Plan.

Smith was also instrumental as a board member of the United Way in helping craft an anti-discrimination policy for the organization in 1994.

"We were ahead of the national sea change in bringing into mainstream discussion the idea that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is wrong," he said.

As a city councilor, Smith took a leadership role in helping secure public funding through a bond issue for the renovation of the Portland Public Library in 1998.

“A library should be a focal point of civic pride,” he said, “and the Portland Public Library was an old clunker at that time. By renovating the library we revitalized that whole section of town.”

But perhaps nothing has given Smith as much personal satisfaction as his pivotal role in the development of the 1.8-mile Eastern Promenade Trail, which connects to the 3.5-mile Back Cove Trail.

The land for the railroad line around the Eastern Promenade became available in 1991; Smith said he believed “a new trail was something that had to happen.”

He made it his personal project to see that it did happen.

For the next 2 1/2 years he served as the hub connecting several key entities, including the Trust for Public Land, the Park Service, City Hall and the federal government. The Eastern Prom Trail opened in April 1993. Today the trail system serves as a magnet for walkers, runners and bikers.

Smith knows that while the city has come far, this is no time for complacency.

“If cities don’t move ahead, then they stagnate,” he said. “They must keep reinventing themselves.”

Smith, meanwhile, is taking some time, he said, “to catch my breath.” But he’s still president of the Portland Public Library trustees and a member of Friends of Shinagawa, an organization dedicated to Portland’s relationship with its sister city in Japan.

Smith does not consider himself a “hero,” but rather someone who’s been at the right place at the right time with the right skills to make an impact.

When asked what advice he would pass on to young people, this extraordinary community advocate offers sage advice, “Get involved in something you feel strongly about, and find others who share your interests to help you get things done.”