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Charles Lewis
Portland City Council candidate

Candidate gets a jump — on potholes

Charles Lewis test-drives his council campaign with transportation questions

By **ANNA GRIFFIN**
THE OREGONIAN

Charles Lewis might or might not stand a chance of unseating City Commissioner Sam Adams next year, but give him credit for taking full advantage of Portland’s political silly season.

While other potential 2008 City Hall candidates sit back and wait for Mayor Tom Potter to decide whether to seek re-election — and, in turn, for Adams to decide whether he’ll seek re-election or go for the top job — Lewis has launched his City Council campaign with a series of camera-friendly events.

Last month, he packed reporters, friends and supporters into a “duck boat” for an amphibious ride to City Hall to turn in his candidacy papers. Tonight he plans to camp out in a downtown park so he can arrive early to file the necessary papers to attempt to qualify for public financing and bring a little attention to the problems of homelessness.

And on Wednesday, Lewis slapped on a hardhat and three wireless TV microphones to fill potholes on his unpaved Northeast Portland street and in the process critique Adams’ new transportation funding strategy.

At this point in the election cycle — a long 10 months before the May 2008 primary — it’s hard to imagine many voters are paying attention. But for a relative unknown such as Lewis, starting early makes sense for a number of reasons.

For one thing, July is a notoriously quiet time for media outlets, thus the crowd of reporters and TV camera folks who trudged out to the Cully neighborhood Wednesday morning.

Also, the introduction of public financing means candidates must start their work earlier. City Hall hopefuls who agree to cap their spending can receive \$150,000 in taxpayer cash, but they must collect \$5 contributions from 1,000 registered voters first.

For a political novice, events such as the pothole repacking



TORSTEN KJELLSTRAND/THE OREGONIAN

Charles Lewis (right, near shovels) talks to the media Wednesday on a dirt road in front of his North Portland home. The Portland City Council hopeful is getting his campaign rolling early.

offer an opportunity to test messages and get more comfortable in front of the cameras before the public starts noticing.

Wednesday’s event had a learning-as-he-goes feel to it.

Lewis, the founder of the nonprofit Ethos Music Center and the Portland Duck Boats tour company, read his speech almost word for word from a clipboard.

Before he started, a neighbor and Lewis supporter complained loudly about the fact that nobody from the campaign had bothered to call the state dig center to ensure that they weren’t going to hit any important infrastructure. (Another neighbor noted that they weren’t actually planning to dig anything.)

As the candidate spoke, a plane roared overhead and a golden retriever parked next to him began feverishly scratching itself. A toddler planted in the front row of the photo op was quickly ushered away by her mother when she began the unmistakable dance of a child in desperate need of a potty break.

Portland has a long history of homespun political theater. People still shout “Whoop, whoop!” at former Mayor Bud Clark when they pass him on the street. They still ask Commissioner Erik Sten about the “Stenmobile” he rode to City Hall in 1996.

Stagecraft aside, Lewis asked some serious questions Wednesday: Why, for example, should Portlanders pay a higher gas tax when City Council members decided to use the bulk of a \$39 million budget surplus on things other than paving and fixing streets?

Lewis made a point of mentioning that he wasn’t singling out Adams, whom he supported in the 2004 campaign, for criticism when the city’s transportation problems have been a generation in the making.

The incumbent hosted a series of town hall-style meetings earlier this summer pitching ideas to raise several hundred million dollars for safety, bike, bridge and paving work. The list of proposals includes a local gas tax, a new parking space fee and a “Hummer” tax on carbon

emissions.

But Lewis complained Wednesday that the town hall meetings were poorly publicized — some notices, he said, went out after the events began — and “somewhat misleading.”

The PowerPoint presentation Adams and his staff used to introduce their ideas included transportation problems that aren’t the city’s responsibility, such as highway congestion and aging bridges, Lewis said.

“Based on what we’re seeing, I am not at all comfortable handing over more money for transportation proposals without a clear reckoning with our elected officials,” Lewis said.

“What’s going to be different this time? How do we know the city is going to be responsible with this money when it can’t even send a meeting notice out on time? Why should we give you \$422 million when very little if any will ever touch this street or any of the 127 miles of unpaved roads throughout Portland?”

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