



the weekly anthropocene



dispatches from the wild, weird world of humanity and its biosphere

By Sam Matey

2018 Election Special: Exclusive Interview with Portland City Council (At-Large) Candidate Joey Brunelle

On Monday, August 6th, this writer interviewed Joey Brunelle (pictured), who is running for City Council (At-Large) in the city of Portland, Maine.

A lightly edited transcript of this exclusive interview follows. This writer's questions and remarks are in **bold**, Mr. Brunelle's words are in regular type. ***[Bold italics]*** are clarifications and extra information added after the interview. Mr. Brunelle's campaign website is available at brunelleforportland.org/.



Hi. I'm Sam Matey, and as you know, I'm interviewing you for the Weekly Anthropocene. Are you familiar with the concept of the Anthropocene? I am. **Awesome! The Anthropocene, as you know, is the geological epoch we're living in in which humanity is the dominant force shaping the planet. What I want to talk to you about today is your policies, highlighting the interaction between the city of Portland and the biosphere, from other life-forms to climactic changes.**

On your website, you call for some innovative policies to address climate change. The three major ones that I saw were working with other cities to develop a regional climate action plan, enacting Carbon Impact Fees on new buildings, and imposing Environmental Impact Fees on cruise ships in Portland Harbor. Could you walk me through these new initiatives? Sure! The first one, the Regional Climate Action Plan. Portland has a climate action plan already, but the problem is that Portland is not the only city in Maine. With climate change and with other issues, I've seen that there's this problem in the region that towns don't work together. Whether it's climate change, transportation, or homelessness, cities aren't working together. Climate change is the most critical issue that we face as a species, and we cannot afford to be working at cross-purposes. I would really like to join forces with at least the other cities and towns in the county and get as many others on board as possible to develop a regional plan. For example, Portland might set the goal of bringing roadside composting to the city, and it would be a lot easier if we got other towns around us to do the same thing, so we could develop an economy of scale.

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The second one was Carbon Impact Fees. **Yes.** I got that idea from California. There's half-a-dozen cities-I think Santa Cruz is one of them, I'd have to go back and check my notes-that have already voted for climate impact fees on new buildings. Portland is undergoing a major building boom, and I don't think the city is doing anywhere near enough to make sure that those buildings are taking advantage of solar power, of micro-wind installations, of energy efficiency, of any of the renewable energy technologies that are now available. The city is kind of acting like it's happy with any development for the sake of development. We have an ability, as the city of Portland, to set some parameters around what kind of development we want. I think it's important that we set the requirement that new development be as close to carbon-neutral as possible, and Carbon Impact Fees are a way to incentivize developers to do that. **That's fascinating. So it would be similar to a carbon tax, or a carbon fee and dividend, charging developers for their carbon emissions?** Yeah, essentially. Closer to a carbon tax than a carbon fee and dividend. We already have something called Transit Impact Fees. Let's say for example a big office building wants to be built, down at the waterfront, and it has 600 employees. The city would calculate how many new cars that would put on the road and assess the impact those cars will have on the condition of the roads. This would be similar. We'd do some calculations on the energy use of a building, assess its net carbon consumption, and set the impact fee based on that. That would set an incentive for developers to make their buildings as carbon-neutral as possible to keep that impact fee as low as possible. **That sounds like an excellent idea.** Yeah, pretty cool, right?

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So the third item of climate policy I saw was Environmental Impact Fees on cruise ships. I'm guessing that would be similar? Very similar. I called it Environmental Impact Fees rather than Carbon Impact Fees, as cruise ships are notoriously pretty bad for ocean environments, and not just because they're belching carbon all the time. The rules around what you can dump in the oceans are different for when you're off the coast of a country and when you're not, and cruise ships are notorious for their waste dumping. In the summertime, there's a cruise ship parked off the waterfront in Portland almost every day. It's brought some money to the tourist industry here-and that's OK, that creates some jobs-but we're not thinking about its negative impact. **So you'd charge it for emissions, pollutants in the water, that kind of thing?** I'd have to look at the models for cruise ships. It could be based on size. It could be a per-person fee, that could be a good shorthand for it. Assessing that fee based on the number of passengers might be an easy way to get at an impact fee.



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What would the revenue from these new fees go to? These aren't taxes. The way that state laws allows cities to collect impact fees stipulates that these fees go to what they were related to. If you stipulate a Transit Impact Fee, it goes to roads, public transport, that kind of thing. **That's fascinating. I didn't know that. So with a Carbon Impact Fee, you'd be creating a positive feedback loop? You'd lower emissions by imposing the fee, and then you'd use the money to develop renewable energy or something?** There you go. Right! With the carbon fees, we could pay for more solar installations. Solar on the roofs of schools, that's another idea I've had. We have a lot of schools in Portland, and they all have flat roofs. There's been some talk about putting a solar installation on the top of King Middle School's roof, but when it's come up, the city has said we don't have the money for that. Here's a great way to have the money for that. **That sounds awesome! These are spectacular ideas.**

"With the carbon fees, we could pay for more solar installations. Solar on the roofs of schools, that's another idea I've had."

Another thing I'd like to discuss-you call for bringing municipal composting for Portland. Can you tell me more about that and about how you would work with ecomaine as Councilor? Curbside composting is something that already exists in Portland. It happens through a private company, Garbage to Garden. I grew up in Maine, but I moved to San Francisco for a while, and curbside composting is totally normal out there. You go into restaurants, and there's three bins for your trash: trash, recyclable, and compost. When they implemented that, they implemented a system where you got charged for your landfill waste but not your compost waste. The big place where that had an impact was businesses, like restaurants and grocery stores that were just landfilling their food waste. When they implemented this, it cut their landfill trash by 80%! **Wow. For more, check out <https://goo.gl/Xrbis1>.** Yeah. There's a lot of power in a mandatory system for composting. Right now, in Portland, we're nowhere near that. We need to first get a universal system up and running. I'd like to talk to Garbage to Garden and get a contract with them, to keep doing what they do so well, and offer it to all residents of the city. **So it's an individual signup now?** Yeah, you pay a yearly subscription. But it's all voluntary, and the cost is a barrier for a lot of people. That's a service, just like trash pickup, that the city can and should provide to everyone. **I totally agree with that.**

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Moving to renewable energy is imperative. However, as I'm sure you know, many of the effects of climate change are already being felt. I'm sure you're familiar with this. Here in Maine, we're seeing heavier tick loads, hotter summers, new vector-borne diseases, more flooding due to sea level rise, and substantial shifts in the



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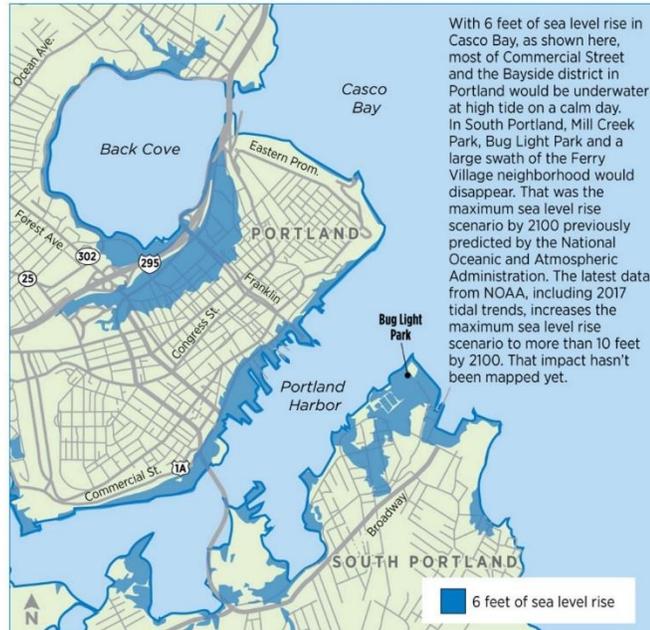
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Gulf of Maine’s ecosystem. There’s actually already been substantial research on how sea level rise would impact Portland. According to NOAA’s Sea Level Rise viewer, 6 feet of sea level rise by 2100 (a quite possible scenario) would inundate much of Portland’s Commercial Street and Bayside districts. How will you help Portland’s physical and human infrastructure prepare for the climate of the Anthropocene? I think the biggest issue related to that in Portland right now is that we have a lot of new buildings going up right now on or near Commercial Street. Hotels, developments, a new corporate headquarters for Wex... We’re building these massive buildings and not

requiring that they be prepared for the sea level rise that we know is baked in. 100 years from now, when the first floor lobby of the Wex headquarters is flooding, who’ll be dealing with that? Taxpayers. We need to start acknowledging that sea level rise is going to happen, and we need to start building with that in mind, and maybe not allowing big developments to be built at sea level. That’s an obviously bad idea. **Yeah.** Commercial Street is going to be pretty regularly underwater in 100 years, 150 years, as is Bayside. So the whole area around Hannaford’s, Back Cove, Whole Foods, Marginal Way-that area has already been flooded more frequently by heavy rain a couple times in a year. We can’t raise up entire neighborhoods at this point, a lot of those buildings have been built. I’m less up on my adaptation game than I am on my renewable energy, so I’m not sure what can be done in terms of salvaging what is down there. But at least we can prevent people building new buildings that we know will be flooded. **I agree, that’s just sensible.**

How will rising sea level affect Casco Bay by 2100?



SOURCE: Maine Geological Survey and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

STAFF GRAPHIC | MICHAEL FISHER

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On your website, you call for investing more in public transport. You want to build 20 miles of new bike lanes, invest more in the METRO bus program, and bring back commuter rail service. This sounds awesome-can you tell me more about it? Sure. There's a lot in there. The city of Portland has been working for the last three years to build its first protected bike lane. It's taken three years, nothing has been built yet. It's been altogether too long. This is not rocket science, this is just a protected bike lane, it's not a big deal. The fact that it's taken three years and we're still not there yet is just outrageous to me. We know that getting more cars off the road will reduce our city's carbon impact and help comply with our own Climate Action Plan. Building more bike-friendly infrastructure is important to that. I bike a lot, and there are streets in Portland where I do not go, because it's not safe. Either the bicycles are intermingled with the traffic in a really dangerous way, or the streets are in such bad shape that I'm dodging potholes as I'm dodging traffic. Another crazy thing is that if you add up all the new development proposed on the peninsula of Portland, there are over 4,000 new parking spots to be built. I don't think any of those new developments are being assessed for transit impact fees, so they're not going to help with public transit. They're just going to add more cars, full stop. Maine Medical Center is building the largest parking garage in Maine right now, there's new parking being built on Franklin Street and at the waterfront...We are not doing enough to encourage developers and big employers to engage with METRO and focus more on public transit, which we know is a proven solution. More people on the same transit burns less fossil fuels.

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And lastly, light rail. Light rail is a great form of transportation when you know where people want to go. If you're not sure where routes need to go, you can use buses, because buses can stop practically anywhere. But for a place like Congress Street in Portland, you know lots of people are going to want to go up and down Congress Street. That's a great spot to put rail infrastructure. It's higher capacity, it can be more comfortable, it can be more of an attractive option for passengers. It could also be something of a tourist attraction. So, yeah, those are all things I want to do. **That sounds excellent.**

You call for protecting Portland's schools from state-level budget cuts and supporting branch libraries-which I think is awesome. I believe the City Council also has some authority over school curriculums-what are your policies on supporting science education, ensuring that Portland kids have the tools necessary to understand the new challenges of the Anthropocene? The City Council doesn't have power over the school curriculum, the School Board does. That's not within our purview. **Okay.** That's an interesting thought. I'll talk to some School Board people about that. Thank you for the idea.



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The city of Portland has 63 parks and administers an urban forest of 20,000 trees. I don't know if you're aware, but new research has found that urban forests like these are extremely important in terms of carbon sequestration. A recent study by the University College of London found that the London park Hampstead Heath stores almost as much carbon as an equivalent area of tropical rainforest. If elected, how will you help manage and protect Portland's parks and urban forests? Great question. Portland does a great job with its parks. Portland really prides itself on the quality on accessibility of its parks, and I think that's great. I think we need to protect not just the parks, but the open areas that are private, but not yet developed. Last year, there were a number of acres in the Stroudwater neighborhood up for development-Camelot Farm. A developer planned to build over 90 houses in a new sub-development on that land. The Portland City Council had no objection, and I did object to it at the time, because this is not how we should be building new housing in 2018. This is a suburban model from 1970 or 1980, and this is green space we're never going to get back. I think we need more of an eye to this kind of thing. I guess there's this a theme through everything I've said. We need to develop responsibly. We need to move away from this "Build, baby build" philosophy and realize that economic growth might be a good thing, but we need to be aware of the negative externalities of that kind of construction, whether it's the carbon impact, the loss of green space, or the destruction of sequestration resources.

"We need to develop responsibly. We need to move away from this "Build, baby build" philosophy."

One of the biggest problems I see with a lot of political issues, especially local ones, is that people aren't aware, aren't engaged with their local government. That is so true. How will you help include citizens in how Portland is run? My day job is marketing and communications. I take things that my clients are trying to sell or explain and condense it into simple, understandable language. I think that the city of Portland has a lot to learn from this world. We need to explain why the city does what it does in plain language.

Also, the city could be improved by bringing more people into the decision-making process. One thing I want to bring to Portland is Participatory Budgeting. This is a system that over 3,000 cities worldwide already use to give residents more control over how city money gets spent in their neighborhood. Right now, if you want a new playground in your neighborhood, you have to call up your city manager or the mayor, make your case, and beg and plead. You have to trust that somebody will shepherd it to get funding behind closed doors at city hall. It's all



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opaque, and it's a terrible system. Participatory Budgeting will change this. It will bring a public decision-making process to each neighborhood, where people can decide for themselves what they want to see money spent on in their neighborhood. Things like lighting, or park benches, or accessibility, stuff like

"It's all opaque, and it's a terrible system. Participatory Budgeting will change this. It will bring a public decision-making process to each neighborhood, where people can decide for themselves what they want to see money spent on in their neighborhood."

that. People can volunteer these ideas, they can decide among themselves to turn these into proposals with the help of city staff. Then the neighborhood can vote, and the project with the most votes gets funded. Politicians aren't involved in the decision-making, city staff are only involved in an advisory role, and ultimately the neighborhood gets built what it wants to get built. It's been unusually successful, and not only because it gets stuff built, but because it teaches people how governing works, and how much things cost when you're a city. And that can create this wonderful next generation of leaders. The next generation of people who work for city councils will come from neighborhood-level work like Participatory Budgeting. **That's an awesome idea.**

So, you've answered a lot of my questions with some very well-reasoned, thoughtful answers-thank you for that. Based on all of these policies, and your whole vision for reasoned development and participatory government, I want you to make your case. You're running against Nick Mavodones, the current At-Large City Councilor for Portland. Could you tell are readers: why are you and your policies better for the city than Nick Mavodones and his policies? Nick has been on the council for 21 years, and I

acknowledge that he's spent a lot of his life in public service. But I have not seen any evidence that he's coming to the table with these kind of policy ideas. I think he has a very different philosophy about being on the City Council. I want to be proactive, I want to look at what other cities are doing, like with the carbon impact fees in California, and adapt the good ideas for Portland. I want to bring the good ideas to Portland and experiment with them. It's hard to get more people involved, but we need to. Like climate change. Climate change is the biggest issue that we face, and no one city, or city councilor, can solve it on their own. We need all hands on deck, we need to not be afraid of public participation. We need to bring all groups into the room and say "We need to work together to solve this, what are your ideas?" That's the philosophy I want to bring to this job.

"I want to bring the good ideas to Portland and experiment with them."

Is there anything more you'd like to say? No, that was pretty damn thorough! (laughs).

Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle. It's been a huge pleasure talking with you! I live in Gorham, but if I lived in Portland, I'd definitely vote for you! Thank you so much. Thank you for the work you're doing.