



By Sam Matey

## Local Leaders: An Exclusive Interview with Councilor-elect April Fournier

April Fournier (pictured) was elected on November 3, 2020 to an at-large seat on the City Council of Portland, Maine (meaning she represents the entire city, not one of the five districts). She ran on a strongly environmentalist and pro-social justice platform, and is the first Indigenous person to win city-wide elected office in Portland. A lightly edited transcript of an exclusive interview with her follows. This writer's questions and remarks are in **bold**, Ms. Fournier's responses are in regular type. ***Bold italics*** are clarifications and extra information added after the interview. Her campaign website is <https://www.aprilforportland.org/>.



**There are so many things I want to talk to you about! Let's start chronologically, if you will-why did you decide to run for Portland City Councilor?** Such a great question. There's so many different things that were the catalyst for me. The biggest thing is within this year, in COVID, with everything that's happened, it brought us really insular. We had to turn off the static. I'm a mom, I work full time, I go to school, and I do roller derby, so my life was super busy. Being able to put all of that on pause, when we all had to go home, it slowed everything down so I could pay attention to how our city was responding to this crisis. How are we able to provide services to those most in need? This is hard. We've never seen anything like this. I've gone through political training, I've been paying attention to what's going on in Portland on the outskirts, but not really jumping in. This pause allowed me to really see some of the things that were concerning. Those people that are unhoused don't feel like they're heard or supported, to the point that they created an encampment on the steps of City Hall. I think the protests that have happened around Black Lives Matter, trying to create more equity and inclusion within our city, is another component of that, for me. I started to feel that inner fire, I can continue to



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write letters to the editor and give testimony at council meetings, or I can run for office and be what I want to see in a representative. I thought, I'm ready, let's run. I did, and I won, which is great! The biggest thing for me, the underlying message for who I am as a person and who I want to be as a leader, is inclusion. As we're making any decisions at the city level, around housing, environment, climate, social services, it needs to be inclusive of the people who are directly impacted. And we're not really good at that as a city yet. When we start to think about what are the barriers that prevent people from participating, that's where we run into a disconnect. The great thing about Zoom and remote meeting is lots of people can tune in and hear what's going on in Council meetings, but what we also learned is there are lots of community members that don't have the same access to Wi-Fi, so there's still a barrier. Having someone who's at least going to look around the table and say there are important voices who are not in this room with us...if there's anything I've learned in my life as an indigenous person in a predominantly white state, and as a parent, as someone who struggles financially, I know when I want to participate but everyone in the room doesn't look like me, I feel like I'm not going to have a connection, so I'm not always going to take that first step to join the conversation. What are some of the things that prevent people from walking through the door? Sometimes it's just that invitation from someone already sitting at the table. That's really what I'm hoping to do in my role.

**So, I have a bunch of questions about specific policies. Can you tell me about your campaign idea to have cruise ships pay a carbon/environmental impact fee?** I have not done a ton of research on the feasibility of implementing that, but to me, we talk about Portland being such a tourist destination. We're inviting all these people to come to our city, but I don't know we're always capitalizing on the use of our resources. We allow these giant cruise ships to come into our bay and dock at our waterfront, and they don't come without an environmental impact, the carbon they're emitting, the fluids they're leaking. If we're going to continue to allow this, imposing a fee so we can offset that-and whether that goes to testing of the impact, or to the One Climate Future plan, can we funnel money into boosting our Sustainability office-there's ways we can use those funds. For me, we're getting the benefit-sort of-cruise ships are coming in and people spend money, but it's almost a neutral financial impact, and a negative environment impact. We should even them up.

**As you know, Portland and South Portland have been collaborating for the last few years on a united climate action and resilience plan, the One Climate Future initiative. They just recently approved a draft. How do you feel about the One Climate Future Plan, and how will you work to implement it as Councilor?** I think they did social media posts,



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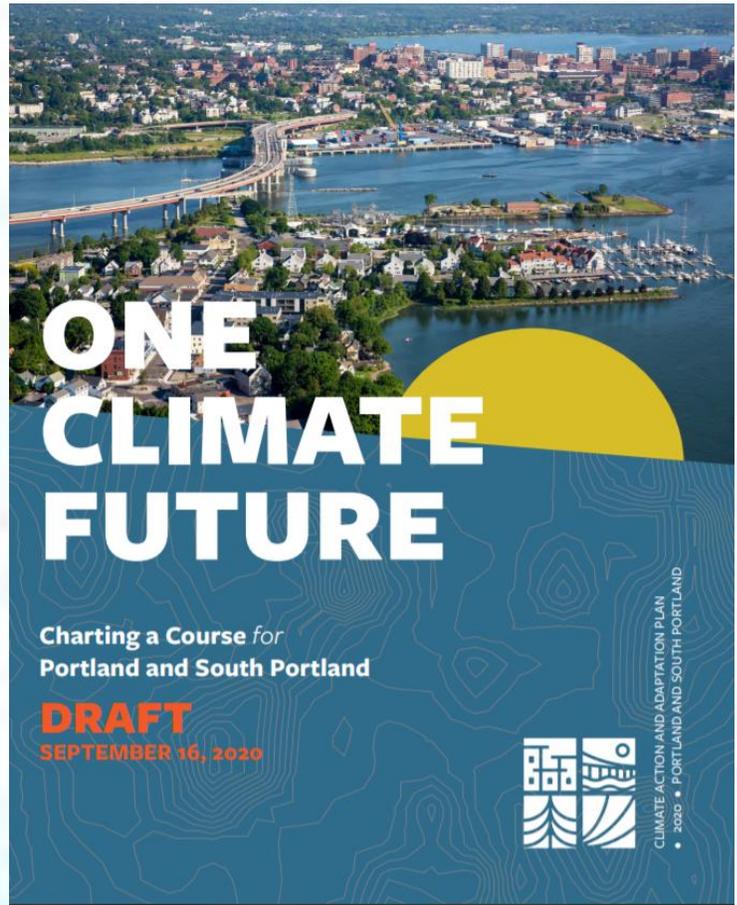


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public announcements, if you want to participate in our One Climate Future study, please take this survey. It goes to how I approach inclusion. If I want to get a cross-section of our city's input, I'm going to do targeted asks. Not everyone has Internet access. COVID made that difficult, but in my mind, we've created this draft. Now, to further refine it and make measurable targets-when I read through it, it seemed there was a lot of "hope to" and "endeavor to." I didn't see as much concrete planning as would like. This is going to continue to evolve and be more specific as we get more groups together. That would be my first step as a councilor, asking the team, can we get some focus groups together? Can we get community members to come in, maybe socially distanced meetings, by directly inviting them?

Community leaders, businesses, schools, let's have conversations with them. What is the level of education

our residents have around a "climate future," what does that mean to them? If you ask an average community member, they're not going to be at the same level-it's important to get multiple voices in the conversation, because people just learning this have really important questions and insight that we might overlook. Someone for whom this is brand new might ask, I don't understand what that term means, and the whole group could benefit from those responses. I know we need to have additional conversations. The state also just released a climate action plan. This is where my efficiency brain starts to come into play, what are we talking about at the state level that matches the One Climate Future? Where can we intersect and leverage the same resources so we're not doubling the work? How can we be the most efficient? It's critical, it has to happen yesterday, if we're able to harness some of the funded work at the state level, how can we reduce some of our costs locally? Let's partner with them and see if they can help us. So I've just started going through both of the plans and comparing them side by side, in this giant notebook. I usually make tables where I compare things next to each other. That's what I'm doing with the state plan and the One Climate Future. **(Check out the One Climate Future plan at <https://oneclimatefuture.org/> and the state plan at <https://climatecouncil.maine.gov/>).** That's the





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other piece we need to do as Portland and South Portland councilors, to have dialogue with the state as to where we can find efficiencies here.

**Can you tell me more about your concerns about the Portland wastewater treatment plan? There have been several sewer overflows into Casco Bay in recent years.** Continuous improvement is my work, and to do that you must look at the data. Any operating system should have performance goals. If we're not meeting those goals, then no one knows what actual quality is going on. Especially with things like waste management, the water treatment plant, Portland Water itself, our energy consumption, if we're not reviewing data for quality assessment, then that's a thing we need to do. We've had multiple spills into Casco Bay-how can that be avoided? And how are we incorporating that into our planning and budget? There are old and outdated things in our wastewater treatment plan, what materials are we using, how long are we going to last? I'm excited to get into Council to start having those conversations with the city manager and his team to find out how we're managing our success. We'll never make sustainable improvements if we don't know what's working and not working- and that's across the board, in schools, in homeless shelters, all our programs.

**Tell me about your support for a municipal curbside composting program.** For me, if we're all going to be working on climate justice, it has to be accessible. We need to be able to remove a lot of the barriers for people to participate. Education is a big piece, we talk about recycling and composting, but not in multiple languages, and not in both audio and visual components. We're not able to fully realize our potential to engage in those practices. The other piece is, right now we have Garbage to Garden, a pay-for service for composting. They're great. Can we create some sort of contract with them because they're established? Let's remove that cost, have this be just part of waste management practices in Portland. Long term, if we have people reducing their food waste, this'll impact our dump sites, we won't have as much stuff going in there. People need to be able to access the service. The more barriers we throw up, if it costs extra money, people aren't going to do it. That's one of the great reasons as a city we moved forward with the big blue rolling bins-so much recycling can be gotten in there that's not going to the





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dump. Making it accessible for everybody is a big component. Do we need to invent a whole new program, or does it make more sense to partner with who's already there.

**Can you tell me how you feel about the Portland Green New Deal resolution that just got approved by the voters? You were one of the few Councilors or candidates for the Council to support the resolution, and as you know, it's a laundry list of policies spanning housing and sustainability issues, with a requirement for new housing in Portland to be more affordable to renters and buyers, to have a local apprenticeship program during construction, and under most circumstances to have a solar or living roof. (For the summary language on the ballot, see <https://www.portlandmaine.gov/DocumentCenter/View/28952/Order--39-2021>. For the full text, see <https://www.peoplefirstportland.org/green-new-deal-text>). Opponents of the measure have claimed that it will make it too difficult to build new housing in Portland-what is your response to that?** It's really interesting. One of the things that's happened in the last few weeks, from an affordable developer perspective, has been "if this passes, we're not going to do anything in Portland." But it has passed, and I know there's developments in works for the Douglas Street fields, and two more people have said they'll go forward with their projects even though it's passed. Change is hard, and people will throw up blocks. I think there is always in-between and compromise we can work with. Just seeing that it passed, and those developers saying they'll continue their projects. **Who were those developers?** There were two RFPs that just came up, the city was moving forward, let's see...One is Maine Cooperative Development Partners, and the Szanton Company. If you go to the Planning Boards Minutes on the portlandmaine.gov page, it's in the council minutes too. The actual proposals are in there. They're still moving forward. It's difficult in that there's new standards you have to meet, but I think that means we have to change how we plan. We have to think long-term and say, we only get one planet. If we're not planning for that now, and not making these small sacrifices now, having to say no and go back to the drawing board and make it work...we have to be flexible enough to do that. This is the only place we get, and we have to start making some sacrifices to make things work. It's passed, and the sky has not fallen. A lot of opponents were saying it would impact the four school renovations in process. I understand there could be an impact, I think that challenges us from a budgeting perspective to say what is it we really, truly need? As we're redesigning these schools, these are the nice to haves, but what are musts? You have to start with the musts. As long as we're getting the things that make the schools safe and sustainable, great, I'm all for that. But if we're spending millions on a fancy entrance, I'm not on board with that. If you want to update the heating system so it's in compliance, let's spend our money on that.



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**Can you tell me about what it's like to be the first Indigenous elected official from Portland?**

I'm super excited that I am the at-large councilor. It's everybody, not just one district. I see it as my job as the first indigenous councilor to really use that space to look for my fellow marginalized communities and

make sure they're being included in the conversation. Right now, I'm attending all the different annual meetings happening, making note of who's not attending and why. I'm really proud that at the District 2 meeting, there were three language interpreters accessible, people were joining the meeting in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Somali. That is an amazing first step, that means we are considering who is in the room. As the at-large councilor, it was great to hear the neighborhood concerns. I'm such a systems person, I'd like to hear the forty-thousand foot view. If someone in District 3 needs something in District 5, how can I make that connection? That goes across housing, climate, transportation, schools, businesses, I like to think I have that big picture brain that sees connections, and that's why the at-large council role makes so much sense for me.

**Can you tell me and the readers what you wish the general public knew about Portland and its politics?** I wish, and I think it's starting to become clear for people, that this is your city. Portland belongs to you. There is a tremendous amount of power in people and organizing. We just had four of five citizen initiatives pass, things people really believed in. It's going to take all of us now. We passed all of these things, now how can I stay engaged and connected? I really want people to know that your voices does have weight, it does have power, and the more you show up and use it, the more the city is going to be something that works for you. I'm not sitting in my seat yet, but I'm connecting with people for when I start my work on December 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Councilor-elect Fournier, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom. Thank you so much for joining this interview. It's been a pleasure talking with you.**

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**DISTRICT 1**  
Wednesday, December 2, 2020 at 6:30 PM

**DISTRICT 2**  
Thursday, November 12, 2020 at 6:30 PM

**DISTRICT 3**  
Thursday, December 10 at 6:30 PM

**DISTRICT 4**  
Wednesday, November 18, 2020 at 6:30 PM

**DISTRICT 5**  
TBD - visit [portlandmaine.gov/DistrictMeetings](http://portlandmaine.gov/DistrictMeetings)

**2020**

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