

The Oregonian

Portland Timbers Field? City negotiating to name park field after team, for a price

By Brad Schmidt

As an upstart soccer franchise, the Portland Timbers more than etched their name in the city's political and sports lexicon.

Now the team wants to take that name and put it, literally, inside a city park.

City officials are poised to name a new futsal field – where small-scale soccer is played – in honor of the Portland Timbers in exchange for the sports team and Major League Soccer paying for the project, slated for this summer at east Portland's Montavilla Park.

The corporate naming deal would be a first for cash-strapped Portland Parks & Recreation, which rolled out new sponsorship guidelines seven years ago without much interest from the deep-pocketed donors that the city hoped to woo.

In a twist, officials would take the city-owned artificial turf from Providence Park, where the Timbers play, and ship it to Montavilla for the new field.

City and team officials say the proposed deal is a win-win, providing a new field at an aging park and giving the Timbers recognition in the process. But some opponents worry that Portland is willing to rename city property for the highest corporate bidder.

"I don't think we're selling out," said Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who oversees the parks bureau. "We're encouraging partnerships to fund an underfunded system."

Portland Timbers Field

The Timbers have become a major force in city sports and politics since Merritt Paulson, the son of former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, landed a Major League Soccer franchise in 2009 and convinced the Portland City Council to spend \$11.9 million toward a \$31 million stadium renovation.

The organization is now pushing the Montavilla project in advance of the 2014 Major League Soccer All-Star Game Aug. 6 at the city's Providence Park in downtown Portland.

Mike Golub, chief operating officer for the Timbers, said he expects some all-star festivities would be held at the proposed futsal field, at Northeast 82nd Avenue and Glisan Street. The project would convert an existing tennis court into a small-scale outdoor soccer field, known as a futsal field.

Golub said the project represents a "couple hundred thousand dollar investment." But city and team officials declined to disclose more detailed costs or the proposed sponsorship agreement.

In exchange for the improvements, city officials are considering naming the facility "Portland Timbers Field" at Montavilla Park, Fritz said.

Golub said the Timbers and Major League Soccer want to move forward on the project even if city officials decide against naming the field after the team.

"We're still in the mode of building fans and reaching kids," he said. "If we can do good by putting in a new field, but also let people know we were part of it, we're certainly open to it."

Parks officials recently presented the concept at a Montavilla Neighborhood Association meeting. It received mixed reviews, said Benjamin Kerensa, who sits on the board.

Some members think the futsal field would pump life into the nearly 10-acre park, acquired by the city in 1921 and home to an outdoor swimming pool and fields for softball and soccer. If futsal becomes a big draw, more families could frequent nearby businesses.

But Kerensa counts himself among the skeptics.

“I just think it’s not ethical to give naming rights to public places,” said Kerensa, who recalls parks in Sacramento, his hometown, being named after civic leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.

Corporate creep

But more and more, local governments are turning to private money to help pay the bills.

From parks in Buncombe County, N.C., to the ball fields in San Diego County, Calif., naming opportunities are available. Two months ago, San Diego County began selling naming rights with the hope of raising \$6 million.

Portland has been offering recognition to parks donors for at least a decade, although officials have yet to name a park facility after a corporate entity.

Nike’s ubiquitous swoosh logo appears in some city parks, for instance, thanks to \$2.2 million spent by the shoe-maker beginning in 2002 to resurface basketball courts.

In 2006, the city added Freightliner’s name to marketing material for its contribution to the summer concert series.

And in 2009 developer Jordan Schnitzer donated \$1.6 million toward construction of a downtown park, which the city named Director Park in honor of his grandparents. Schnitzer contributed an additional \$400,000 for a park fountain that he named “Teachers Fountain.”

City officials in 2007 crafted guidelines that discourage corporate naming of parks or park facilities. But in recent months, they have made administrative changes that provide more flexibility.

Portlander Lili Mandel is disgusted by the prospect of naming park amenities after corporate sponsors.

Seven years ago, Mandel warned the City Council that it was opening the door to unsavory corporate advertising. Even though the city pledged not to name an entire park after a corporation, Mandel predicted that Portland would begin branding park facilities for sponsors – such as the Banana Republic Gazebo.

Today, she laughs when asked if “Portland Timbers Field” is preferable to naming city property after an upscale clothing store.

“I truly wish that I didn’t turn out to be right,” she said. “I would have preferred to be wrong.”

The Portland Tribune

Fireworks fail to go off at city hearing on utility rates

By Steve Law

Portland residents angry about their water and sewer bills had a chance to confront their elected leaders Wednesday night, in what was billed as the first-ever City Council public hearing devoted to utility rates.

The event at Parkrose High School, a part of town where pocketbook concerns are high and support for City Hall is relatively tepid, attracted little more than 100 people, a good number of them city employees and other City Hall insiders.

But anyone expecting fireworks from an angry citizenry came away disappointed, or relieved, depending on their perspective.

City Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Water Bureau and Bureau of Environmental Services, proposes to raise the residential water and sewer rates a combined 4.9 percent on July 1. That would amount to a \$4.44 monthly increase on the average \$90.35 monthly water and sewer bill. Those are among the highest rates in the nation, though other cities are catching up as they address their combined sewer overflow problems as Portland has done.

The hearing came as a campaign heats up over a May 20 ballot initiative to strip control of the two bureaus from the City Council and hand them to an independent board.

Kent Craford, copetitioner of the initiative, complained about City Hall using “water and sewer bills as a credit card” to pay for unrelated programs. But only a handful of fellow citizens rose to complain about excess spending by the two bureaus unrelated to utility services, the issue that precipitated the ballot initiative.

An equal number showed up from Southwest Portland to plead with city commissioners not to cut \$73,000 by ending funding for the Watershed Resource Center in their neighborhood.

Others testified in defense of the Bureau of Environmental Services’ green infrastructure programs, which some view as threatened if an independent board takes control of the bureaus. East Portland neighborhood leader Linda Robinson praised the BES for alleviating flooding in the Johnson Creek basin, where she grew up.

Kellie Barnes, who actively opposed the Water Bureau’s plan to fluoridate Portland’s water supply, said she later joined the bureau’s Budget Advisory Committee and now thinks the initiative poses more risks than benefits. “It may not be what you’re asking for,” she told critics of the bureaus in the audience.

To see city commissioners’ responses to citizen questions and comments Wednesday night, check www.portlandoregon.gov/Fish after April 9.

The Mercury

Altered State of the City

The Rhetoric of Mayor Charlie Hales—and the Reality Behind It

By Denis C. Theriault

LAST YEAR, Mayor Charlie Hales opened his first-ever State of the City speech with a wave of his tool belt and an earnest, down-home parable about how improving the city he loves would be a lot like this one time when he and his father built a house out of stone.

This year? The tool belt stayed behind. Although maybe it shouldn't have.

Yes, Hales made one major announcement when he took the stage at the former Governor Hotel (now the Sentinel) on March 14: Vacation rental listing site Airbnb is building a hub in Old Town, one of the mayor's reinvigorated priorities. Yes, his tough medicine during last year's budget fight has apparently forestalled new cuts this year. And, yes, he could point to some steady progress in police reform (although he's also been criticized for not gunning it on some of the most controversial changes sought by the community).

But those were the rare bricks in a speech that mostly still dealt in blueprints. Just like last year's. Even the theme of this year's speech was the same: "back to basics." And it's clear that many of the issues that vexed the Hales administration in 2013 will be just as vexing in 2014.

So here's a quick look at some of Hales' rhetoric—and the reality that's driving it (and just as often threatening it).

Urban Renewal: Hales, in his speech, put his stamp on a huge shift in urban renewal: He wants to ditch an urban renewal area for Portland State University, which was promised by the previous city council, and also put something like \$1 billion in property, citywide, back on the regular tax rolls.

But he also promised he won't forsake PSU—his wife works there, he noted, and if he does he'll come home to find "all the locks in my house will have been changed." His idea is to expand urban renewal land near the university.

Keeping that promise, however, won't be easy.

First, Hales has to keep the trust of PSU's administration. As the Mercury first reported, Hales' doubts about PSU had become serious enough by last October that the uncertainty complicated a long-planned streetcar project in the district ["Streetcar Collision," News, Nov 6, 2013]. But Hales, the Oregonian just reported, didn't meet with PSU's president to air those doubts until mid-November.

Canceling the district will gut some \$50.3 million in projects at or around PSU. It also needs city council approval. The city and PSU are negotiating how much the city will spend instead. And this time, the O is reporting, President Wim Wiewel is asking for a written guarantee the city won't change its mind again.

Homelessness: Last year's State of the City appearance brought talk of an "epidemic" of homelessness and promised a two-pronged approach: sidewalk enforcement and social services money. The issue wound up dominating the second half of Hales' first year—after the sweep of a months-old camp outside city hall and controversy over a plan to move Right 2 Dream Too into the Pearl.

Homelessness wasn't mentioned much this year, despite ongoing policy work by Hales' office (led by Jackie Dingfelder) and complaints by Hales' police chief, Mike Reese, that homelessness and related issues are unsettling the tourists and workers who fill our downtown.

Hales nodded to a \$1.7 million infusion of one-time cash last year meant for helping homeless families and people of color—but he didn't mention that the money only followed sustained outcry over sweeps. Later, when asked a question by the crowd, he mentioned a homelessness summit attended by West Coast mayors.

But Hales said something else just as interesting about homelessness, even if it was unintentional. Despite the police bureau's concerns about social disorder downtown?

"Tourism," Hales said triumphantly, "is at a record high."

Transportation: Weeks after Hales took office, the city auditor handed him a beautiful political gift: two reports blasting the city's spending on street maintenance and paving, one of Hales' campaign issues.

The reports gave him cover to shift a few million around the Portland Bureau of Transportation—and acknowledge, sanely, that there just isn't enough money in Portland to catch up on street paving, pay for big-ticket projects like rail, and have anything substantial left for bike infrastructure and safety fixes like sidewalks and crosswalks.

This year, the mayor spoke eloquently about the moral crisis spilling from our neglected infrastructure—traffic crashes and people dying where crosswalks had failed them.

But months after the Mercury first reported Hales explicitly promising, "yes, we will raise your taxes" to pay for transportation ["Tale of the Grip Tape," June 5, 2013], Hales has yet to figure out just how he'll do that.

Hales and Transportation Commissioner Steve Novick have paid for polling and attended town hall meetings. It turns out they might not ask voters for all of that new funding—just for some of it. Some revenue measures, Hales confirmed during and after his speech, could be handled by the city council. And he says that's what he and Novick are hearing from citizens.

"There's a strong current of 'do your job,'" Hales says. "That would capture it."

Which does sound about right, doesn't it?

Hall Monitor

Overdosing on Good News

By Denis C. Theriault

THIS WINTER'S bonanza of funding requests from budget-hungry city bureaus and offices—\$32.3 million in asks, even after Mayor Charlie Hales told everyone to keep their hands in their pockets—felt a little like those drunken emails to the boss that got sent instead of mercifully deleted.

And who could blame them? There was talk of a surplus, even if that talk only topped out at a little more than \$9 million. And the city had just suffered through a \$21.5 million budget hole.

That good news went down maybe too easily, and cutting loose probably felt good. Too good. It felt like hope.

And now, like clockwork, here comes the hangover.

The city's budget office issued a memo last week officially confirming that what had once been a \$9 million surplus is now forecast at \$6 million. And that's if there's any surplus at all. If business license tax collections stay unexpectedly weak, "there is the possibility that there will not be any excess ongoing or one-time resources" this year.

More painful is what the budget office did after it looked over those \$32.3 million in requests (many of which were so wishful, they'd never be seriously considered).

It rejected all but \$2.1 million, endorsing just five projects, mostly for promised maintenance work and some emergency preparedness programs.

And then there's devising the best way to prioritize that remaining \$30.2 million—and deciding whether firefighters and sidewalks are more important than homeless women or earthquake preparedness or traffic cops.

Certainly, all of those are worthy. But there isn't enough money. So the budget office has politely told the council it wouldn't be providing any political cover when it comes to figuring that out.

"Council should discuss their priorities, and, if possible, come to consensus on the criteria that should be used for allocating remaining resources."

Translated, it reads something like this: Hey, you put all those politically charged requests on the table. So you figure out which ones you're taking off.

The budget office's reviews aren't the final word on the city's spending plans—but they're important. Bureaus personally present their requests to city council every spring, and the reviews often serve as fodder for questions and follow-up study.

The mayor then takes all that analysis in before issuing his own first pass at a budget—sparking another round of negotiations with the council.

City sources confirm those conversations are beginning early in city hall—with an eye for cutting down the wish list into something manageable. But it won't be simple.

What one commissioner might see as a moral imperative—Amanda Fritz's plan to convert part-time parks workers to full-time, or Steve Novick's insistence on fixing up the city's Westside disaster response center—might be seen as annoyingly expensive or unnecessary.

And yet, in past budgets, each commissioner would usually get something high on their list as budget negotiations dragged on, even if their colleagues were holding their noses.

That may not be possible this time around. But the conversation should be fascinating.

The Portland Business Journal

City bets \$5 million on Colwood Golf Course, Cully land purchases

By Andy Giegerich

Portland's City Council has given the go-ahead for the purchase of the Colwood Golf Course and other nearby land.

The property, which will be managed through a partnership between Portland's Bureau of Environmental Services and Portland Parks and Recreation, cost the city \$5 million. Portland bought the property from the Trust for Public Land.

A combination of system development charges, "reimbursement from golf revenue over time (and) potential grants/partnerships" will fund the purchase.

Most of the 85 acres purchased will serve as industrial property. The city has long eyed the Colwood course as a potential industrial development site.

About one-third of the acreage will become a "public natural area" for nearby Cully neighborhood residents.

"It is land which represents significant environmental and recreational opportunities for the entire City of Portland," said City Commissioner Amanda Fritz.