

The Oregonian

Portland's Columbia Building: DA hasn't decided to investigate, assigns prosecutor to review info

*By Brad Schmidt
October 30, 2014*

Multnomah County District Attorney Rod Underhill hasn't decided whether to launch an investigation into Portland's over-budget sewer office building.

But he has assigned a prosecutor to review some basics.

Underhill's action comes after a group of utility watchdogs for a second time pressed for an investigation into Portland's Columbia Building, a sewer project that saw costs more than triple to \$11.5 million.

In a Thursday letter to Kent Craford, the proponent of the inquiry, Underhill noted that requests for investigations are typically forwarded to law enforcement agencies.

"In this case, it is not immediately clear whether it is warranted for me to seek the assistance of an investigative agency," Underhill wrote. "As a first step, I am assigning prosecutor Tom Mott to review your complaint and any available relevant materials to assist me in making a determination as to whether additional action is needed."

Underhill didn't give a timeframe for making that decision, although he wrote that Mott would contact Craford within a week.

Craford led efforts to strip oversight of Portland's water and sewer operations away from the City Council in the May election. Voters overwhelmingly rejected the ballot measure.

Craford also is involved in a lawsuit alleging improper utility spending. A Multnomah County judge this year determined that the City Council exceeded its authority when Portland spent nearly \$1.2 million from water and sewer funds for outdoor restrooms and publicly financed political campaigns.

Portland street fee vote won't be day before Thanksgiving: Portland City Hall Roundup

*By Brad Schmidt
October 30, 2014*

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales won't push for a controversial street fee vote on Nov. 26 – the day before Thanksgiving – and instead expects the City Council to delay final action until sometime in December.

The timeframe has been unclear in recent weeks as the City Council's long-established schedule has been overturned.

As it stands, the City Council will take public testimony on a new street fee charged to residents and businesses at 2 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 20. That hearing originally had been scheduled for 2 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 12.

A formal vote typically comes one week after the first reading of proposed legislation.

With the delay, that meant the City Council's first opportunity to vote would be Wednesday, Nov. 26, the day before Thanksgiving – typically a day when many members of the public and private sectors are preparing for a four-day weekend.

But Dana Haynes, a spokesman for Hales, said the vote will be delayed beyond Nov. 26.

Haynes said the vote will likely take place on Wednesday, Dec. 3, instead.

But given the controversial nature of the topic – and City Council's ability to push for changes after hearing from the public – even that date remains a target.

"We can't presuppose what will come up at the Nov. 20 meeting," Haynes said in an email.

With a street fee hearing now three weeks away, specific details remain unknown.

Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick have said they hope to gross about \$40 million annually from residents and businesses.

No billing rates have been formally proposed, although officials are studying an income tax on residents and flat fees on businesses. The income taxes could range from \$1.50 to \$200 a month, with low-income earners exempt. The businesses fees could range from \$2.50 to \$120 a month.

It's not clear when a formal proposal will emerge, although City Council documents for the Nov. 20 meeting will be released publicly on Nov. 14.

The street fee isn't the only big policy decision looming amid the holiday season.

Hales' office now plans to bring a proposal to revise at least one urban renewal district for City Council consideration on Dec. 17. If the process follows typical protocol, it would return for a vote on Dec. 24 – Christmas Eve.

Haynes didn't immediately have information about the mayor's plans for a vote on amending urban renewal boundaries. Haynes said he would check with staff and provide that information.

This post will be updated when we hear back.

Portland's end to free disabled parking opened up spaces, exposed widespread abuse downtown

*By Joseph Rose
October 30, 2014*

Three months after Portland stopped providing free unlimited street parking to any vehicle displaying a disabled placard, new information released by the city on Thursday offers a startling indictment of how motorists abused the old system.

Since the city started charging for parking on July 1, the number of cars with disabled permits occupying primo metered spaces has apparently dropped by as much as 70 percent, according to Portland Bureau of Transportation data obtained by The Oregonian.

PBOT had parking enforcement officers tally the number of basic dark blue disabled placards they saw on their beats before and after the changes.

On September 10, 2013, when it wasn't uncommon for many cars with placards to occupy on-street downtown spots for weeks or months without moving, they counted 1,033 vehicles with placards hanging from rearview mirrors.

However, on Oct. 1, three months after the city began charging motorists with basic disable permits \$2.40 for 90 minutes of parking, only 313 placards were counted.

Meanwhile, 26 of 105 designated disabled spaces set aside for drivers with disable placards were being used. That included 50 new metered disabled-only spots added as part of the the new parking rules.

On one enforcement beat in the heart of downtown ("Beat 3"), the number of parked vehicles with disabled placards plummeted from 31 percent to 8 percent in 372 spaces, the data show.

In fact, there were dramatic drops in several of the city's central business districts:

- On "Beat 4," stretching from the west end of the Morrison Bridge to Broadway -- and book-ended by the Southwest Taylor and Stark streets -- the percentage of 313 parking spaces occupied by vehicles with disabled placards nosedived from 28.1 percent to 4.7 percent.
- Just a few blocks to the north, downtown Portland's "Beat 11" experienced a similar epic drop -- from 28.3 percent of 361 spaces in September 2013 to 6.6 percent on Oct. 1.
- The apparent abuse wasn't just happening in downtown Portland. Across the Willamette River in the Lloyd District, on beats 30 and 31, the proportion of vehicles with placards slid from nearly 20 percent to 3.6 percent.

Commissioner Steve Novick -- who pushed for the policy shift after years of complaints from downtown business owners and inaction by the City Council despite years of citizen task force discussions -- said it's obvious that some people were abusing the city's compassionate approach to helping disabled drivers.

"I'm also sure that some people with real mobility issues, absent the availability of free parking, have found other ways to get downtown," Novick said. "What we're seeing is that, in fact, it's possible to free up spaces previously used up all day by commuters with placards."

Before July 1, a walk downtown revealed block after block after block lined with vehicles -- hundreds of them, from beaters to BMWs -- whose owners for years received unlimited free parking in the city's most desirable metered spaces.

Parking enforcers and many retailers had the unshakeable feeling that a lot of able-bodied commuters were getting their hands on disabled permits and scamming the city out of millions of dollars in parking revenue each year.

A basic disabled placard can be acquired from Oregon DMV with just a doctor's note.

Without set standards classifying disabilities, getting a permit in Oregon is as easy as having your physician sign a form saying your mobility is restricted. A big problem, advocates for the disabled say, is doctors want to please their patients and too often sign off on permits out of fear of losing them.

After a walkabout with a parking enforcement officer last fall, Novick noticed the same thing and moved to rectify the situation.

The city estimated that it was losing \$2.4 million a year to disabled placard abuse.

Meanwhile, downtown business owners had for years complained that the free disabled-parking policy was devastating them. They said they needed turnover in on-street parking for customers in order to stay afloat.

"We've heard from a lot of business owners who are happy about the rule changes," said Liza Dossick, spokeswoman for the Portland Business Alliance, on Wednesday. "Almost immediately, they noticed that more parking was opening up."

The light blue "W" wheelchair user placard still allows users to get free parking under state law.

People with basic placards still get a deal on metered parking. In a one-hour, 90-minute or two-hour spot, for instance, you can pay the maximum but stay for up to three hours.

If the city's new disabled parking ordinance has created significant hardships for people with mobility issues, Joe VanderVeer, chairman of the Portland Commission on Disability, said he is unaware of them.

At the same time, he said the commission will continue to monitor the situation. "We will work with PBOT to ensure that the disabled parking program meets the needs of our citizens," VanderVeer said.

That's not to say that the change hasn't hit some unforeseen snags.

Although drivers with disabled placards could pre-purchase scratch-off permits lasting four hours, six hours or all day in a single spot, PBOT quickly realized that it had failed to accommodate people whose disabilities make it tough to use the meters to buy any amount of parking.

Some people told PBOT that it was difficult for them to pay at the one-to-three-hour meters because it was a hardship to walk to the meters or disabilities such as arthritic fingers made it hard to use the credit card slots.

In response, the bureau designed a scratch-off dashboard permit that's good for three hours and costs \$2.40.

Novick said several drivers with disabilities have purchased the scratch-off permits.

The Mercury

Police Reform Liaison Won't Be Chosen Until November 12—With Some Twists Potentially In Store

*By Denis C. Theriault
October 30, 2014*

There was some talk during a Portland City Council hearing yesterday that commissioners might fulfill a major part of the city's police reform deal with the feds—choosing an independent "compliance officer/community liaison"—as soon as next week.

Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who's been running point on the hiring process, said a "placeholder" ordinance for a vote next Wednesday would likely be filed this afternoon, going public on Friday. Then, maybe on Monday, after a lot of shuttle diplomacy led by Fritz, the council would announce its consensus pick in a press release. (Read all about the finalists, first identified by the Mercury, [here](#) and [here](#). And here's a copy (pdf) of yesterday's agenda packet.)

The Oregonian initially reported as much last night, accurately capturing the discussion that had played out. But Fritz sent word, after the hearing, that things won't actually be moving that fast. Any vote, she told me, now won't come until November 12 at the earliest. And some substantial twists might be in store.

"We won't file an Ordinance on the COCL tomorrow," Fritz told me Wednesday night. "I want more time to discuss options with Council members and gather more information. The ordinance will be filed next week for hearing the week after."

It's not clear what other information Fritz and her colleagues might be still gathering. Fritz, when asked this afternoon, initially said only "more conversations and exploring options." But when pressed further—asked if there was still a chance the council might reject all three finalists (something strongly urged by some advocates in the mental health community) or seek to combine one or more of the applicants' proposals—she offered there are still "lots of potential outcomes," and said "no decisions" have been made yet.

A vote on November 12 would come almost 45 days after a special selection committee vetted the three finalists during an all-day set of public hearings, launching them into an intensive series of one-on-one meetings with commissioners. That hearing came a month after a federal judge approved the deal between the city and the feds.

The city's settlement deal with the federal Department of Justice—meant to address findings Portland cops have engaged in a pattern or practice of using excessive force against people with mental illness—says a compliance officer is supposed to be in place 90 days after the judge's approval.