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NEWS COLUMN

Jazz fans can start bopping again

On the Town

BY PHIL STANFORD

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Just three weeks ago, it looked like the end of the road for the Portland Jazz Festival.

As the event's organizers explained, a major sponsor had pulled out, leaving them with no choice but to pull the plug on the five-year-old event, which had attracted so much favorable attention — not to mention tourist dollars — to the City of Roses.

Unless they received a “miracle” infusion of \$100,000, they said, the festival — including all events scheduled for this February — was a thing of the past.

Well, it appears that miracle has occurred, thanks to P-town's newest commissioner, Nick Fish, and his longtime ally, former mayoral candidate and travel agency owner, Sho Dozono.

And best of all, as Fish points out with justifiable pride, “It didn't take a penny of public money to make it happen.”

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At a time when our national leaders are dithering over the fate of the economy, it's good to know that at least here on the home front, we're capable, on occasion at least, of acting in our own best interest.

As I've tried to argue in this space, you certainly don't need to be a jazz buff to see the benefits of filling a couple thousand Portland hotel rooms in the middle of February — which is what the festival has been doing for several years now.

According to a festival spokesman, the festival brings about \$2 million a year into the local economy via tourist dollars spent on food and lodging.

Fish says he considers the festival — now recognized as one of the best in the nation — a major component of the city's effort to attract “cultural tourism.”

“People come to Oregon for lots of reasons. Its natural beauty, recreation and sports, and, of course, our culture, which includes the jazz festival,” Fish says.

“In the winter months,” he continues, “the jazz festival is especially important to Portland because it fills hotel rooms that would otherwise be empty.”

Not to mention, of course, that Fish is a pretty big jazz fan himself.

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The day the news of the festival's imminent demise hit the press, Fish got on the phone with Dozono — and together, along with jazz boosters Brian and Gwyneth Booth, they devised a plan to save the jazz festival.

As already noted, the plan requires no subsidy from the city, although that might easily have been justified as a stop-gap measure.

Instead, it relies entirely on an appeal to the enlightened self-interest of the tourism industry. As Fish correctly reasoned, if the industry didn't go for it, there was no way to sustain the festival, anyway.

“The key,” Fish says, “was when Alaska Airlines stepped forward with a commitment of \$50,000 a year for the next two years.” As is only proper, the festival now will be called the Alaska Airlines Portland Jazz Festival.

Other contributing companies include U.S. Bank, Precision Cast Parts, Qwest, NW Natural and the Portland Trail Blazers. Travel Portland, the tourism agency, also came through with a donation.

Now that they've done their part, all the rest of us have to do is buy a ticket or two.

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