

The Mercury

An Offer They Couldn't Refuse

Pearl Developers Will Pay Right 2 Dream Too to Go Somewhere Else

By Denis C. Theriault

IN A SURPRISING turnabout, just weeks after hitting reset in the long impasse over Right 2 Dream Too, city officials this week will anoint a seemingly major breakthrough in the homeless rest area's quest for a new home.

The Pearl District developers fighting R2DToo's move to a city-owned lot beneath the Broadway Bridge have agreed to buy that land for \$142,000—and then pay R2DToo nearly \$850,000 more to move somewhere, anywhere else.

And in an essential promise, the city has put in writing a vow not to boot R2DToo from its current home, at NW 4th and Burnside, until it "finds a suitable alternate site" for relocation.

The transaction was announced just before snow and ice buried the region on Thursday, February 6, underlining the valuable role a sanctioned, thriving tent shelter can play in the city's safety net.

R2DToo's board tentatively approved the proposal over the weekend, Board President Ibrahim Mubarak announced Monday, February 10, on OPB's Think Out Loud. The Portland Development Commission (PDC) and Portland City Council are expected to sign off Wednesday, February 12.

The PDC must formally approve the sale to the Pearl group, whose interest in the lot was first reported by the Mercury. The council will approve an ordinance accepting the additional money for R2DToo and detailing how that money can be spent. Nothing in the deal limits where R2DToo can move. A real estate broker, working on a \$1,000 contract, is working to find potential sites within a 1.5-mile radius of the Portland Building.

"It's been quick for me and them," Commissioner Amanda Fritz told reporters.

But she was emphatic that the arrangement involved "no taxpayer money," something expressed just as strongly by Mayor Charlie Hales' office and Mubarak. Mubarak says he wrestled with the offer before embracing it.

"I'm not going to say no to it, when we can do something to help people," Mubarak says. "It's good they are doing this. And I hope they are doing this to bring out their humanitarian spirit, and not just doing it like capitalists do, to just get rid of things and pay people off."

The deal comes amid reports of campsite sweeps by cops downtown and in the Central Eastside this winter, something R2DToo has been talking over with the police. It lands days after the announcement of a police/business effort regarding homelessness, awkwardly named "Prosper Portland."

And it comes during renewed focus on the future of Old Town. The PDC is looking to buy the rest area's current site at NW 4th and Burnside, and it just announced another stab at redeveloping the empty Grove Hotel across from the rest area on NW 4th.

In a city where nearly 1,900 people sleep outside every night, Fritz said she thinks Right 2 Dream Too is "here to stay."

Right 2 Dream Too opened in October 2011. It hosts 100 people every night who might have nowhere else to go for a safe night's sleep. It also serves as a community for homeless Portlanders looking to transition out of what can be a painfully lonely existence, especially when it's compounded by mental illness or addiction.

"We don't have anywhere where it's legal for people to be on the streets and sleeping," Fritz says. "We should think of it as being here for as long as people need it."

The hunt for a new home for R2DToo has been on for months. Fritz, upon taking over the Portland Bureau of Development Services, spent last summer looking for a new spot as part of an effort to settle a lawsuit challenging some \$20,000-plus in code fines.

The Pearl lot she found, called Lot 7, was her third choice of government-owned properties. Soon after she announced the deal and a legal settlement in late August, Pearl neighbors and developers, led by political big shots Dike Dame and Homer Williams, put on a full-court press to kill it.

They got a break in October after persuading Hales, during an occasionally nasty city council hearing, to let them take a stab at finding a location. The Pearl group, working with land-use attorneys, also filed a preemptive appeal of any move to Lot 7 with the state's Land Use Board of Appeals.

The money due to help Right 2 Dream Too could be used to lease or buy, and then improve, the right piece of property. If any money's left over, it will be set aside to help the homeless. And while no one would commit to something so far ahead, it could even be used for another site like R2DToo.

"Of course we would try to find another lot," Mubarak says. "There should be four [sites like Right 2 Dream Too in Portland]."

Water Wars, Redux

A New Water Board's on the Ballot, and Pushback Is Coming

By Dirk VanderHart

MAY'S MOST-CONTENTIOUS vote may be a decision whether Portland's water and environmental services bureaus should stay in the hands of city hall or fall under control of a new board.

And with the so-called Portland Public Water District officially certified for the ballot earlier this month, the measure's many opponents—led, according to sources, by Mayor Charlie Hales—are finally sharpening their knives for a fight.

Labor unions, environmental groups, neighborhood associations, and city commissioners have all come out against the water district proposal. The Portland Business Alliance, on Tuesday, February 11, chimed in with its own concerns about the measure, but said it won't take an official stance.

Union members fear for their jobs, since there's been talk of layoffs. Environmentalists call the proposal a ploy to erode the city's environmental programs. Hales told Willamette Week the proposal is an "act of political terrorism."

But organized opposition has so far been scarce. That's about to change—with the leadership apparently coming from city hall.

A formal campaign is in the works, sources say, with two meetings held to date, and a short list of campaign managers drawn up. Many people are hesitant to offer specifics, but sources in city hall say Hales is the effort's nucleus and will be its strongest champion in city government.

"This is one of his priorities," confirms Hales' spokesman, Dana Haynes. "He's taking time away from the office to make telephone calls and meet with people while he's not here."

Also involved in talks is Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the Portland Bureau of Environmental Services and Portland Water Bureau. He has been a consistent target of the water district campaign since its launch last summer ["Squirt Guns at Dawn," News, July 24].

Fish wouldn't confirm that he'd participated in meetings, or other details surrounding the campaign, other than to say: "I have not determined what my role would be. My primary focus is leadership of the two utilities."

(Fish is also ramping up a re-election campaign, and currently faces two challengers on the May 20 primary ballot.)

The controversial measure would create a seven-member elected board to run both utility bureaus. Its proponents say the board would transcend alleged cronyism in city hall and determine the city's utility rates and infrastructure projects with a clearer eye. Opponents point out that the measure's backing comes almost solely from industrial water users and property management firms—not the grassroots coalition some have claimed—and say it's a bid to lower commercial water rates at the expense of residential customers.

When an opposition campaign is formally rolled out, donors are ready.

"The truth is I'm kind of waiting around to be able to see where to send out money," says Joe Baessler, political director for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 75, which represents hundreds of water bureau staffers.

The union has estimated the proposal could cost 250 jobs for its members, according to Mark Gipson, president of AFSCME Local 189.

The Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 483, which represents more than 100 environmental services bureau employees, also opposes the measure, says President Scott Gibson.

But it's an awkward time for labor to team up with city hall. Both AFSCME and LiUNA are members of the District Council of Trade Unions, which is in the midst of a contentious contract battle with the city.

"I've got members that are ticked off at the city over these contract issues," Gipson says. "These are the same people I need to come out to fight for their own jobs."

Then there are groups like the Audubon Society of Portland and Friends of Trees, some of whom met with Baessler late last year to strategize.

"Frankly, I wish there was a formal campaign going four or five months ago," says Bob Sallinger, conservation director for the local Audubon chapter and one of the measure's fiercest opponents. "I think folks were waiting to see if it would make the ballot."

Hall Monitor

Novick Calls in the Cavalry

By Denis C. Theriault

COMMISSIONER STEVE NOVICK was hardly musing idly this month when he emailed a blunt memo to his fellow city commissioners and four local news reporters demanding deeper budget cuts to the Portland Police Bureau—starting with the nearly \$900,000 it spends on its mounted patrol unit.

"The mounted patrol is largely ornamental," he wrote. "The primary justification for the unit, as I understand it, is 'crowd control.' But marauding crowds have not seemed to be a major source of crime in Portland for quite some time."

Two days after his February 3 email was posted on Blogtown—the first place it appeared in full—Novick took his putsch against the horses to a definitive, attention-grabbing level during an otherwise low-key Portland City Council meeting on February 5.

What was supposed to be a feel-good hearing on the parks bureau's long-planned (and long-delayed) South Waterfront Greenway bike project turned testy after Novick balked at nearly \$500,000 in unexpected annual operations and maintenance costs.

The commissioner had seized on an apparent lapse. Despite policy requiring the city to account for maintenance costs every time it approves a new park, no one, in this case, had actually built that maintenance figure into the city's current financial forecast.

And with only \$5.9 million in new ongoing revenue available next year, Novick correctly pointed out that righting that wrong would further shrink what was available for other priorities—like permanently restoring firefighter jobs, or building sidewalks, or outfitting a Westside earthquake response center.

So he cut a tidy political deal.

In exchange for promising not to hold up the project, he got two of his colleagues to go on record with their willingness to "re-examine" the money spent on the mounted patrol. For those of you not so good at math and politics, that's a council majority.

Amanda Fritz, the commissioner in charge of the parks bureau, went along with the idea after admitting she wasn't willing to cut something else in the parks budget to make room for the Greenway project.

Fire Bureau Commissioner Dan Saltzman followed, after Novick asked whether he'd be willing to, say, lay off firefighters to bail out the Greenway project. (Nick Fish, presiding over the meeting while Mayor Charlie Hales was in South Africa, did not weigh in.)

Novick's rhetorical victory is a decided blow for the mounted patrol—which survived last year's budget bloodbath only after a well-heeled private group, Friends of the Mounted Patrol, promised a big enough check that Hales felt compelled to stay the ax.

The Friends group didn't waste time rallying their troops again. Citing our post, they urged members to call city hall the next day. And, proving the depth of their pockets, they bought commercial time on KGW during the Olympics.

But Novick's effort lands at the same time as some other bad news: Structural defects at the mounted patrol's barn on NW Naito, announced last week, mean the horses have to be driven back and forth every day from Aurora. That's another cost the city has to bear.

And that could be the breaking point that puts the unit out to pasture (pun intended)—sentimental TV ads or not.

The Daily Journal of Commerce

City commissioners reject Park Avenue West appeal

By Jeff McDonald

Attempts to halt Park Avenue West were denied Wednesday by Portland City Council after commissioners agreed unanimously that an affordable housing component could not be required for the project.

Local 49 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) had appealed a previous Portland Design Commission decision to approve the 30-story project, saying it lacked housing accessible to its workers. SEIU's attorney, Hillsboro-based David Noren, said the city had to look at the broader policies of its master plan, which sought to include an affordable housing component in Central City projects.

"The Park Blocks should be accessible to all people and all incomes," Noren said. "All we are asking is the council to show some vision and give folks who work downtown affordable rents."

Steve Pfeiffer, a partner in Seattle-based law firm Perkins Coie, said denying the project would impose standards on a specific project after it had been approved.

"There's a lot of aspiration attached to this appeal saying what the council should do," Pfeiffer said. "That doesn't say what council is required to do."

Commissioners agreed, saying that although affordable housing remains the city's goal, it was not something they could impose on a project midstream.

"I'm just not persuaded that (affordable housing) falls under the legal conditions that were agreed to by the applicant," Commissioner Nick Fish said. "While I appreciate the opportunity to have had this discussion, we are bound by the city code. I believe we have only one option in this hearing."

The project's developer, TMT Development, and the city still must negotiate requirements for four stories to be added to the tower. TMT will have many options to meet those requirements, such as adding eco-roofs or bicycle lockers, said Kara Fioravanti, senior planner for the city.

The city will submit its formal written opinion on the appeal by March 5, giving SEIU 21 days to appeal to the state's Land Use Board of Appeals, Fioravanti said.