

The Oregonian

Steve Novick on why roads 'rot' as utility bills go up: Portland City Hall Roundup

*By Brad Schmidt
March 25, 2015*

Portland's rundown streets are in far worse shape than the city's aging sewer and water pipes.

Why?

Commissioner Steve Novick - in charge of the Portland Bureau of Transportation, and a champion for a controversial street fee - is blunt.

"We're used to it. We're used to raising water and sewer fees every year, and we're used to letting the transportation system rot," Novick told the City Council during a sparsely attended work session last week. "And that's understandable. Inertia is a powerful force.

" ... But in this case, if we keep on doing what we're used to doing, the city will die. Because a city cannot function without a working transportation system, anymore than it can survive without a working water and sewer system."

The numbers back up Novick's point.

Portland has about \$34 billion in assets, with the Bureau of Environmental Services (\$13.2 billion), the Transportation Bureau (\$9.7 billion) and the Water Bureau (\$8 billion) making up nearly all of the pie.

When the City Council needs to replace water and sewer pipes, officials simply raise the water and sewer bills paid by ratepayers using the system. Like clockwork, bills jump every single year.

But for transportation? The City Council doesn't have a bill to increase, relying instead largely on gas taxes (which recently increased) and parking receipts (which officials could raise, although meter rates have been set at \$1.60 an hour since 2009).

Different revenue streams, different results.

Nearly half of the city's transportation assets are in poor or very poor condition, with streets particularly crummy.

But only about one-sixth of the city's sewer and stormwater system is that bad. For water, it's less than one-tenth of the system.

And, as Novick pointed out, no one has suggested that water and sewer bills should be referred to voters - although a public vote was demanded during last year's ill-fated street fee effort led by Novick and Mayor Charlie Hales.

(In fairness, however, rising utility rates are certainly controversial enough to be part of mayoral campaigns, lawsuits and reform efforts.)

To emphasize the difference, Novick noted that the average monthly water and sewer bill is slated to increase \$4.58 beginning in July. Since 2009, the average family's bill will have gone up by about \$27 a month.

Just connecting to the water system - called a base charge, which customers have to pay even if they never turn on the tap - will be \$11.91 a month.

And that, Novick pointed out, is essentially equal to the fury-inducing monthly transportation charge he and Hales proposed last year.

N. Portland property with stunning downtown, river views could be next city park

*By Andrew Theen
March 24, 2015*

For almost a quarter century, students at Open Meadow, an alternative high school in North Portland, had one of the best-kept secrets in the Rose City.

The 120 students who studied in the 1910-era building had stunning, unobstructed views, with the railroad bridge spanning the Willamette River dominating the foreground and downtown Portland in the background.

But the school moved last year, and the building and surrounding grassland went up for sale --\$1.85 million for riverfront views and a huge slab of land zoned for residential use in a hot real estate market.

Now, Portland parks officials believe they're close to creating the next city park out of the nearly three-acre plot of land perched on a bluff overlooking the Willamette River in the Cathedral Park neighborhood.

The Portland City Council will vote on an \$880,000 plan Wednesday to buy the school's property. The deal, funded by parks system development fees, is contingent on council approval.

Parks officials are cautiously optimistic the plan is all but complete, locking up prime land in a neighborhood where infill and rising home prices are increasingly common.

The park would serve an estimated 797 households within half a mile, with more than 477 of those currently not served by a nearby park. The site is home to two centuries-old white oak trees, formally protected as heritage trees.

Andrew Mason, executive director of Open Meadow, said his nonprofit needs as much equity as it can get to buy a new building in east Portland for the high school. But the school started discussing selling the property to the city or University of Portland last year before listing the land on RMLS.

"The great thing is that will become park land as opposed to being developed," he said.

After almost nine months of negotiations, he's excited to have the deal finalized. "We're thrilled it's happening so that neighborhood will be held intact, and held intact likely in perpetuity," Mason said.

Mason said the deal doesn't include the former high school, which he said could be the future home of a Montessori school.

Mark Ross, parks spokesman, said the neighbors notified the bureau in April and first drew attention to the property as a potential park. The city signed a purchase and sale agreement with Open Meadow in December.

In an email, Ross said the bureau studied maps showing potential service gaps to find out if the property filled a need. "Plus, you saw the view," he said in an email. "It would be a pretty incredible park in an area that needs one!"

If the deal is approved, the land wouldn't immediately be open to the public, Ross said, adding that could be several weeks away.

Officials estimate the property would cost \$43,400 to maintain each year.

The Portland Tribune

Smile, you're on a body camera

*By Jim Redden
March 24, 2015*

Portland and Multnomah County are moving slower than nearby law enforcement agencies to equip their police officers and sheriff's deputies with body cameras — a new technology being widely advocated as a way to help restore public trust after a series of controversial police killings last year.

The City Council has set aside \$834,619 to buy cameras and related equipment but, so far, nothing has been purchased. The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office, which employs both patrol and jail deputies, is still researching issues related to them. No time has been yet set to present a request to the Multnomah County Commission.

Meanwhile, several cities in the metropolitan area already are using body cameras on at least some of their police officers. They include Beaverton, Oregon City, Sherwood, Tigard and West Linn. The Columbia County Sheriff's Office recently begin requiring its jail deputies to wear body cameras when dealing face-to-face with inmates.

Columbia County Sheriff Jeffrey Dickerson is a strong supporter of body cameras for law enforcement officers.

"The technology is there, and I'm committed to transparency. The more people see what law enforcement faces every day, the more the public will be on its side," he says.

However, Dickerson does not fault Portland or Multnomah County for moving slower. He admits that his office can move faster because it is so much smaller, meaning the cost of buying the equipment and storing the digital recordings is far less. For example, his county only spent \$24,000 to buy 30 cameras. There are only four jail deputies on each shift, meaning there's relatively little data to store, compared to how much would be collected by the much larger number of Portland officers and Multnomah County deputies.

"We never had enough money for even a single dash(board) camera for a patrol car, but we can afford this," Dickerson says.

Cost is a growing issue in Portland. A recent memo from the City Budget Office warns the \$834,619 set aside by the council might not go very far, considering that the city has around 1,000 officers who could be required to use body cameras. According to the memo, the cost of storing all the recordings they collect has not yet been estimated.

"Law enforcement agencies have reported that the ongoing costs associated with data storage, retention policies, and records management have exceeded most current staff levels and initial cost estimates," the March 9 memo reads. "Costs associated with data storage can be significant and, over time, there will be increased requests for video records as more people are aware of the existence of the recordings."

Privacy concerns

Other issues are delaying the rollout of body cameras in the Portland Police Bureau, however. When the council held a hearing on seeking bids for the cameras in December, they heard from community members who urged them to draft guidelines about how the cameras will be used before they are purchased and deployed. Among other things, some worried about privacy issues, including whether video recordings of people experiencing mental health problems will be released to the public.

Mayor Charlie Hales, who is in charge of the police bureau, agreed the city should wait until the 2015 Oregon Legislature addresses such issues before moving forward.

"We need to be able to balance the public's right to know with their right to privacy," Hales says.

How police body camera recording will be treated under the Oregon Public Records Law is one of the thorniest issues being discussed by the 2015 Oregon Legislature. Everyone agrees that releasing recordings of controversial encounters can help answer questions and restore public trust. However, many recordings are sensitive, including images of people experiencing mental health problems and interviews with victims of rape, domestic violence or child abuse.

The city is supporting House Bill 2571, which requires law enforcement agencies to establish policies and procedures for retaining recordings from body cameras. It also provides an exemption to the state law that requires all parties to be notified when they are being recorded. Such an exemption already exists for cameras mounted on the dashboards of police cars. Dickerson says such notifications are not required in the Columbia County Jail because inmates already have been arrested and informed of their rights.

According to Portland lobbyist Andy Smith, the city is working with other interest groups — including prosecutors and defense attorneys — on amendments to HB 2571 to determine when and how such recordings should be released.

The Oregon Newspaper Publishers Association also is involved in the discussions. At this point, Executive Director Laurie Hieb says the new law must protect privacy but maintain accountability.

“ONPA has serious concerns with a flat-out exemption of all police body-cam videos from public records. The public has a right to know about police activities and how they interact with the public. With recent investigations of police shootings across the country and other situations that lend themselves to doubting either a member of the public or a police officer, we feel it is in the best interest of both the public and law enforcement to be as transparent as possible. We obviously see that it gets complicated in certain situations and hope that well-thought-out procedures will handle those situations,” Hieb says.

However, Open Oregon, a 20-year-old charitable organization dedicated to teaching state residents about their rights to public information, says the public should have even more access to them than other records.

“Body-cam videos taken by police officers most certainly should be disclosed as public records, just like any other police record. The current public records law allows an exemption for ‘criminal investigatory’ information, and I would hope that body-cam videos would not be included in that exemption because they are images, usually, of events that occur in public,” says Judson Randall, a retired journalist and Open Oregon’s president.

Other cities are struggling with the same issues. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department considers the recordings to be investigative records that are exempt from California’s public records law. They will only be released if required by a criminal or civil court proceeding, a condition being challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union.

After the Legislature acts, the Portland Police Bureau must adopt policies governing the use of body cameras before they can be deployed. Because of that, they probably won’t be put into service until 2016, at the earliest.

Support growing

President Obama came out strongly in favor of body cameras after the controversial police killings of unarmed African-Americans in Ferguson, Mo., and New York last year. In December, he announced \$263 million in funding for law enforcement agencies to help purchase 50,000 body cameras. However, two months later, the Task Force on 21st Century Policing that he appointed stopped short of insisting police wear body cameras because of concerns about people’s privacy and who will retain the recordings.

Body cameras — officially known as Body Worn Video — are small cameras worn on clothing or glasses that digitally record and store what they see when turned on. The recordings can be transferred to storage units and played back on computers. Police in Europe first began experimenting with body cameras in 2005. By 2014, 41 cities in the United States were using them on some of their officers.

Advocates argue body cameras can reduce violent confrontation between police and civilians when they know their actions are being recorded and can be reviewed later. If an encounter escalates into violence, the recording can help determine who was at fault by providing an objective account of what happened. However, even advocates admit such recordings are not perfect, because they only capture what happened in front of the cameras. Even then, the officer has to turn the camera on for it to record anything in the first place.

There are a litany of other issues that a government must consider before committing to body cameras for its law enforcement officers. Although the initial cost is relatively small, the cost of storage can be very expensive, especially for a large law enforcement agency. Additionally, there are the privacy issues — not only for the civilians being recorded, but also for officers who could get in trouble for criticizing superiors during unguarded moments.

Many of these issues were discussed in an October 2013 research paper by ACLU Senior Policy Analyst Jay Stanley. The six-page paper notes the civil liberties organization is against pervasive government surveillance, but believes body cameras have the potential to serve as a check against police abuses. At

the same time, the paper says body cameras have the potential to invade privacy more than other government surveillance systems, such as street and police dashboard cameras. In the end, it argues for policies to protect privacy but still allow body cameras to be deployed.

“Overall, we think they can be a win-win — but only if they are deployed within a framework of strong policies to ensure they protect the public without becoming yet another system for routine surveillance of the public, and maintain public confidence in the integrity of those public protections,” says the paper, titled, “Police Body-Mounted Cameras: With Right Policies in Place, a Win for All.”

Willamette Week

Pay to Playground

City Commissioner Amanda Fritz proposes overhauling fees on developers to fund parks.

*By Aaron Mesh
March 25, 2015*

City Commissioner Amanda Fritz is proposing a massive increase in some of the fees the city charges developers of new homes and commercial buildings.

Fritz is proposing an overhaul of the fees used to expand the city’s parks.

The plan Fritz is scheduled to bring before the City Council on April 15 could mandate a 37 percent hike on the fees that a developer of a new, 1,600-square-foot single-family home pays to Portland Parks & Recreation.

The builder of a smaller house could see fees go down. But the developer of a new office building could see the bill from the parks bureau go up nearly 300 percent.

Unlike the much-savaged “street fee” Mayor Charlie Hales has pushed for in the past year, Fritz’s fee change has until now moved forward quietly.

Developers—some of whom first saw the size of the proposed fee change earlier this month—say new fee increases threaten to further drive up the cost of housing.

“All it does is push prices up,” says Greg Goodman, whose family is one of downtown’s largest property owners. “I’m not opposed to an increase, but tie it to the cost of living and population growth. To raise fees 300 percent? That’s mind-boggling to me. They should have told us they were going to do this before we supported the parks operating bond.”

Fritz argues the change would reward builders of smaller houses.

“One of the intended consequences of this policy is larger homes will pay more,” she says. “That may encourage developers to make them smaller, which in turn makes them more affordable.”

Fritz’s proposal to increase fees comes as colleagues Hales and City Commissioner Steve Novick have taken fire for more than a year on a proposed \$46 million street fee to fund transportation projects.

And Fritz is proposing the fee increase less than six months after Portland voters approved renewing a \$68 million property tax bond to fund parks. That money will go to repairing existing parks facilities, from decaying bridges in Forest Park to decrepit playground equipment in Southeast Portland’s Creston Park.

But the parks bureau can’t use that money to purchase new parkland or build new playgrounds. The bureau instead bankrolls its capital projects with fees on developers called systems development charges.

Other bureaus also levy charges on new construction to fund water, sewer and transportation infrastructure—but parks fees are the biggest component of such charges. For instance, the developer of a single-family home in Portland currently pays \$18,360 in total systems development charges: \$8,582 of that goes to parks.

Fritz's proposal would make the fees more progressive by scaling them to the square footage of the project. In fact, in neighborhoods outside the central city, the parks fees for a home of less than 1,000 square feet would drop to \$6,773.

But the parks charges for a 1,600-square-foot home, a more common size, would rise to \$11,265. The developers of bigger homes could pay the parks bureau \$13,185.

The increase proposed for developers of commercial properties is far steeper: The builder of a 2,549-square-foot retail building would see parks fees jump from \$14,066 to \$56,312—a 300 percent spike.

It's unclear how much more money these fee hikes would bring the parks bureau. Portland Parks & Recreation spokesman Mark Ross says the changes are not designed to increase revenue but to divide costs more equitably and better reflect the city's growth. (Commercial development pays less than 5 percent of the fees paid to the parks bureau, according to city records.)

"The increases," Ross says, "are simply necessary to help pay for the impact on Portland parks of new development."

But the bureau is seeking additional funds. City budget documents show Portland Parks & Recreation says it faces a \$47.7 million annual shortfall over the next 10 years to meet its goal for adding parkland and community centers.

Parks bureau officials have been working since December 2012 on changes to how they calculate systems development charges.

Justin Wood, a lobbyist for the Home Builders Association of Metro Portland, sat on the parks committee that studied the changes. He saw the fee increases in December—and now says they are too steep.

"We'd love to have better parks," Wood says. "But who pays for them? When we start talking about \$13,000 on a single-family house, just to parks, it starts to get a little crazy."

The Portland Business Alliance sent a March 10 letter to parks officials, warning that its members are "extremely concerned" by the fee hikes.

"Portland has largely become unaffordable for middle-income families buying a home," PBA president Sandra McDonough tells WW. "These increases are going to make housing less affordable."

Fritz disagrees. "The proposal is not designed to raise more revenue," she says. "We're doing it to be more fair. New development needs to pay its way. No more, no less."

GoLocalPDX

New NW Portland Parking Plan Effective this Week

*By Kirsten Nicolaisen
March 25, 2015*

The first phase of the new Northwest Portland parking plan takes effect this week as Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) crews begin installing Zone M signs to mark an expanded parking permit area and alleviate longstanding congestion in the neighborhood.

The new signage is part of a years-long planning effort by the City, neighborhood residents and businesses to ease parking challenges and improve the livability and business vitality of the growing neighborhood.

See the Northwest Parking Area Map Below

The newly expanded permit area stretches from W Burnside Street to NW Vaughn Street and westward from NW 16th to NW 25th avenues. Previously, Zone M's north boundary stopped at NW Irving Street. An adjacent parking permit area next to I-405, called Zone K, will remain unchanged.

Blocks with a Zone M sign will allow visitors to park for up to four hours, and allow neighborhood residents who have purchased \$60 annual permits to park without those time restrictions.

PBOT crews are expected to complete all sign installations within two weeks. The permit rules take effect on each block as signs are installed. Enforcement hours are 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Sunday and holiday parking are not affected.

“The new signs mark an important milestone in a collaborative effort between the neighborhood and the city to alleviate parking congestion and frustration,” said Leah Treat, Portland Bureau of Transportation director. “Visitors and residents will now have an easier time finding parking and businesses will benefit from improved access by their customers.”

The parking permits are available to people who live, work or own property within the Zone M boundaries, and more than 2,000 permits issued since they became available in February, according to PBOT.

The new parking plan also calls for parking meters to be installed on the commercial corridors of NW 21st and 23rd avenues and some surrounding streets. The meters will be installed in late spring and will have time limits of two and four hours at a price of \$1.60 per hour.

Northwest Portland residents who haven't yet purchased permits may apply for them by contacting the Portland Bureau of Transportation by mail or in person. PBOT's offices are open weekdays on the 8th floor of the Portland Building, 1120 SW Fifth Avenue. Mail in applications should be sent attention to Suite 1304.

Northwest parking area map:

