

The Oregonian

Arts tax payment time is here again: Portland City Hall Roundup

*By Andrew Theen
April 03, 2015*

Portland revenue officials are reminding residents their third annual arts tax payment is due by April 15.

The voter-approved Portland Arts Education and Access Income Tax is due the same day as federal and state income tax returns. According to city officials, more than 74,000 Portlanders already filed their 2014 arts tax returns, generating \$2.5 million in revenue.

City officials plan to crack down on scofflaws this year. Miss the deadline by three days? You'll face a \$15 late fee. Forget about it for six months? Revenue staffers will tack on another \$20 penalty starting Oct. 15.

"It is our hope that many Portlanders will choose to file and pay online," Revenue Bureau Director Thomas Lannom said in a statement. "Paying online is fast, easy and keeps administration costs low so more money flows to schools and arts organizations."

Portlanders have a number of options, though, including filing in person or via snail mail. The Revenue Bureau has an arts tax customer service line, 503-865-4ART (4278) to answer all questions.

A quick refresher: Portlanders approved the arts tax in 2012. The ballot measure ensures funding for elementary music and arts teachers as well as operational support for dozens of nonprofits through the Regional Arts & Culture Council. The income tax survived multiple legal challenges.

Arts tax revenue

Tax year 2012:

Net revenue: \$7.9 million

PPS share: \$4.5 million

RACC share: \$1.3 million

Tax year 2013:

Net revenue: \$7.7 million

PPS share: \$4.5 million

RACC share: \$880,000

All residents must pay the \$35 tax unless they're under 18, make less than \$1,000 per year in annual income of any kind or whose household income is at or below the federal poverty line (\$23,850 for a household of four).

This year's arts tax system has some new features.

As promised, residents may now pay the tax through Turbo Tax, H&R Block and other "leading tax preparation software products," officials said.

The arts tax form is also now available in 10 languages in addition to English (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Laotian, Romanian, Russian, Somali, Spanish, Ukrainian and Vietnamese).

Some residents can file for a permanent senior exemption if they're 70 or older and have only non-taxable income (Federal Employee Retirement, PERS, Social Security, U.S. Treasure interest) or make less than \$1,000 in annual income.

In the first two years, the city collected \$15.6 million with roughly 58 percent of the money going to Portland Public Schools (Here's a detailed breakdown of where the money went each year).

Portland should better track how much land it owns, when to sell it, audit finds

*By Andrew Theen
April 02, 2015*

The city of Portland owns a lot of land but doesn't have a plan for how or when to sell excess property, according to an audit released Thursday.

Auditors said the city lacks a clear and consistent policy to define and identify surplus property.

Staff in City Auditor Mary Hull Caballero's office found "there is no overall city strategy for real property management and there is little guidance regarding the identification and disposal of surplus real property."

The auditors described a city government with no clear centralized property manager and a system in which individual bureaus' interests may supersede overall city goals. The result: Portland may waste taxpayer money by having redundant services instead of a centralized property manager, and miss opportunities to sell excess land that could otherwise benefit the public and generate more money for the city.

The Audit Services Division started investigating how the city manages its surplus land after a publicized Water Bureau land deal in Southwest Portland prompted a complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman from neighbors in late 2013.

Water Bureau officials sold surplus property in 2012 for \$140,000 to a developer, but neighbors said they were not properly notified. Water officials advertised the so-called Freeman Tank property on Craigslist for \$197,000. The bureau has since revised its policies to a 13-step "more robust public notice and engagement process."

Since the Freeman Tank episode, Portland finance officials started some reform efforts.

Portland's Facilities Services department in the Office of Management & Finance is working to create a full inventory of city property. That work is yet to be completed. OMF is requesting money in the upcoming budget to hire a full-time city property coordinator.

"We agree it's important for the city to ensure the information it maintains about real property owned by city bureaus is accurate and complete," Mayor Charlie Hales and OMF leaders said in response to the audit.

Auditors asked the city for an estimated acreage of city property, and the facilities managers said they had "moderate" confidence the city owned 15,652 acres across 3,451 tax lots.

City reforms should include the comprehensive inventory and how each property is used. "It is important to know if a property is a park, a surplus parcel sitting idle, or a warehouse leased to a partner agency," the report said.

Portland should also periodically review the inventory to strategically manage its property, according to Caballero's office.

Hales and OMF said the city is already working with an internal committee on improvements, which "could lead to a recommendation" for a citywide policy to better identify surplus land.

Portland close to deal to redevelop Zidell property

*By Brad Schmidt
April 02, 2015*

After months of negotiations, Portland officials are again nearing a deal with the Zidell family to redevelop about 30 acres in the South Waterfront District.

A deal is expected to head to the city's urban renewal agency by May, said Jillian Detweiler, a policy director for Mayor Charlie Hales.

If this sounds familiar, it's because city officials thought they were close to a deal in December. Then the process stalled, in part because of concerns about affordable housing, parks and the timing of urban renewal amendments proposed by Hales.

The Zidell family owns the largest canvass of open land in Portland's central core, and city officials expect development to include 1.5 million square feet of office, retail and residential space.

But the family still uses some of the Willamette River waterfront property for its barge business and the transformation is expected to take at least 10 years, with property south of the Ross Island Bridge to be developed last.

One holdup in negotiations has been affordable housing. City officials previously worried that Zidell had "no desire" for affordable housing, and the company wanted to delay any deal to let the fire die down.

Commissioner Nick Fish on Wednesday said Zidell had offered about an acre of land for affordable housing. But Detweiler declined to provide specifics, including whether Portland's purchase option would drop if the city builds affordable housing elsewhere in the district (which had previously been proposed).

Both sides also made progress negotiating over a future park under the Ross Island Bridge. Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who oversees Portland Parks & Recreation, said she met with company President Jay Zidell on Monday and broadly agreed to a concept.

"We have a tentative agreement," she said. "It needs to be vetted."

Fritz said "there was a genuine misunderstanding" about what each side thought the other wanted. City officials were concerned that Zidell wanted a small urban park, and Zidell thought city officials wanted a sprawling park with expansive ball fields, she said.

Nothing has been settled, but both sides have agreed to begin planning for the park by 2018.

"There's much more shared agreement on, yes, it needs to be green, yes, there needs to be active uses," she said.

There's also talk that the City Council may need to rewrite provisions of its stormwater code, although Detweiler said she didn't know anything about that.

Under terms of a deal presented to the Portland Development Commission in December, the public would contribute at least \$34.4 million to redevelop Zidell's property.

Of that, the development commission would tap \$27.4 million from its newly amended North Macadam urban renewal district, the Portland Bureau of Transportation would contribute \$1.5 million, and the Bureau of Environmental Services would pay \$3.6 million toward a district stormwater system.

Zidell's ZRZ Realty would pay an estimated \$36.3 million for roads, parks and stormwater improvements.

Willamette Week

Buckle Up: 'Taxis Gone Wild' May Come to Pass in Portland

*By Anna Walters
April 2, 2015*

A city experiment to deregulate Portland's taxi industry—deemed "Taxis Gone Wild," by City Commissioner Steve Novick—gained speed today, at a meeting where a special task force voted on rules to govern the Uber and other ride-hailing companies.

Uber and Lyft are set to roll back to town mid-month for a 120-day pilot period. In preparation of their arrival, the task force has been proposing new rules and tweaks to the city's current "for-hire" transportation regulation.

Their latest recommendation: To rip out rules restricting the number of taxi companies and number of vehicles allowed to operate in the city. Additionally, they propose allowing any new cab companies to enter the market without the usual city approval.

As for Uber and Lyft or any other ride-hailing services that want to pick up Portlanders? They get to have an unlimited number of cars on the road too.

These proposed rules—set to be voted on by City Council April 15th—would only apply for the 120-day pilot period, while the city collects the data from all "for-hire" companies.

The task force is looking to city staff to hash out the fine print, like who would issue permits—the city or companies—and how to issue permits speedily.

City May Require Uber To Share Its Ride Data

By Anna Walters

April 2, 2015

After Mayor Charlie Hales brokered a deal in December allowing Uber and competitors to come back Portland this month, a big question loomed: Would Uber share its tightly-held data with city regulators so they could create policies to govern the tech giant?

The latest set of rules drafted by a special task force are pointing to yes—Uber, Lyft, and other ride-hailing companies will likely have to cough up ride data if they want to operate in the city.

The draft recommendations—scheduled to be reviewed by City Council on April 15—require both taxis and ride-hailing companies to share the date and time of each ride, pick up and drop off locations, wait times and the duration of trips.

"We only have anecdotal evidence on how well or how poorly taxi service in Portland has served," says Dana Haynes, the Mayor's spokesman. "We thought this would be a good opportunity to see if we could get some actual data so we could make data-driven decisions."

Although Haynes couldn't point to any specific probes the city would launch, he says data on how Portlanders use for-hire cars will help determine, "with some assurance, 'here's what we need in our community: fill in the blank.'"

If these rules are adopted by Council and the companies cooperate, Portland will become one of the first cities to plumb Uber's rich database.

In January, Uber agreed to give Boston officials a peek under the hood to help track traffic congestion and guide planning decisions. And the data debate continues to rage in New York City, where city council is grappling with what kind of data Uber and other should hand over.

Additionally, Portland officials are recommending the city collect information on how long riders in wheelchairs or those with limited mobility wait for their taxi or Uber to arrive, so later the city may conduct "a comparative analysis of wait times" for those passengers.

So, will the city get its data when the pilot program launches later this month? Probably.

Brooke Steger, a general manager for Uber, says the company has no problem sharing data the city may request, so long as user confidentiality is protected.

"We've shared very comprehensive data packages with cities like Boston, and we're definitely open to sharing similar packages here in Portland. The goal would be to help [the city] understand how the transportation networks are working together, how traffic is flowing, and how we would be able to help."

Lyft is "open to working with cities to see how ridesharing can inform transit planning," company spokeswoman Chelsea Wilson wrote in an email. Wilson wrote that Lyft has shared trip data with other cities in the past and noted that sharing data "will be important to the city [of Portland] during this pilot program."

Portland Business Journal

City task force suggests killing Portland's taxi count limit

By Mason Walker

April 3, 2015

"Taxis gone wild."

That's how city commissioner Steve Novick describes a scenario suggested by the task force assigned with overhauling Portland's taxi system to make room for companies like Uber and Lyft.

According to Willamette Week, the special committee says Portland should get rid of its limit on the number of taxis and allow more companies to operate during the 120-day test that will be voted on by city council later this month.

The pilot project will be a period in which the city can collect data about ride-sharing and car-for-hire services, an experiment expedited by Uber's rogue move in December. Portland's taxi code has been widely criticized — but in some cases defended — for limiting competition and preventing popular app-based services from entering the market.

While it's expected that Mayor Charlie Hales and other city commissioners will allow the test period, it's unclear what will happen after the pilot. Portland may require companies to share detailed ride data, something Uber (and likely Lyft) doesn't much care to do.