

The Oregonian

An ecoroof for a Dumpster? Work remains on Portland utility spending: Editorial Agenda 2015

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
June 14, 2015*

On Wednesday, Portland City Council voted to establish the Portland Utility Board, a budget watchdog that will, commissioners hope, prevent the creative use of ratepayer dollars that fueled a recent effort to wrest control of water and sewer services from the city. Fortunately, that effort failed, and Wednesday's vote suggests the city got the message.

Mostly.

The Council's action would have been more reassuring if it hadn't earlier in the day agreed to spend more than \$5,000 in ratepayer funds to build an ecoroof over a Dumpster. If nothing else, we suppose, the decision illustrates the need for the PUB.

The Dumpster dollars belong to one of 13 Community Watershed Stewardship grants selected by the Bureau of Environmental Services, the city's sewer and stormwater department. In all, the grants amount to \$100,000, which will come from the Sewer System Operating Fund. The distribution of such grants is an annual ritual, last year's most memorable destination for ratepayer dollars being a two-week environmental camp run by an organization the city described as "a youth-led non-profit, with experienced coaches, mentoring future social justice leaders, including leadership for environmental justice." How attendance at this camp related to the provision of water and sewer services is a mystery.

This year's most notable proposal comes from Portland Youth Builders, which will receive \$5,352 to build an "educational" ecoroof covering a Dumpster and recycling receptacle in the organization's parking lot on SE 92nd Avenue. The structure will soak-up rain that otherwise might hit the receptacles and become parking-lot runoff. But "most importantly," says the group's application, it will "transform PYB youth into watershed stewards through education about the impact of eco-roofs ..."

The project – part educational initiative, part social justice instrument and tangentially related to water quality - is certainly well-intentioned, and the kids involved may well derive some lasting benefit. But it's a stretch as a use of utility funds, which are supposed to be spent on things that are reasonably related to the city's water and sewer services. To squeeze this project under that umbrella is to strain the definition of "reasonably."

So, too, is what might be this year's most compelling grant request, whose goals would fail to impress only the most heartless. The Iraqi Society of Oregon, working with the Columbia Slough Watershed Council, will use the grant - \$6,000 – to train young Iraqi refugees to become "watershed ambassadors." This will involve some on-the-ground restoration activity, including invasive-species removal and litter pickup. Much of the grant money, however, will be spent on field trips, including an instructional paddling trip in the Slough, a guided walk along nearby trails and the engagement of an art therapist "to promote bi-cultural identity development."

This sounds like a good and worthwhile experience for those involved, and it's unimpeachably well-intended. Still, the use of sewer and stormwater funds to pay for paddling trips and art therapy should make ratepayers wonder just how committed city officials are to exercising discipline in the use of their money.

The city defends the grant program as an appropriate response to requirements for a federal stormwater discharge permit. The permit does, indeed, have an education and outreach component that directs related programs "to achieve measurable goals based on target audiences, specific stormwater quality issues in the community, or identified pollutants of concern." It's quite a leap, however, from this to art therapy, paddling excursions and a Dumpster ecoroof.

While Uncle Sam may not be inclined to flyspeck the city's grant program with ratepayers in mind, ratepayers themselves should have no trouble recognizing the laxity – or impressive rationalization – at work here. After all, they've seen it before with the Water House, the use of ratepayer funds to buy the River View Natural Area and so on.

Fortunately, flyspecking spending with ratepayers in mind is exactly what the Portland Utility Board is supposed to do. The Community Watershed Stewardship program is a good place to start. The City Council deserves credit for approving the PUB, but making big gestures like this means little if you don't sweat the small stuff, too.

The Portland Tribune

City zooms in on Vision Zero 'action steps'

*By Jennifer Anderson
June 11, 2015*

A woman's bloody arm, wedding ring on finger, lies lifeless on a crosswalk. A bold message accompanies the image: "She watched for the signal. The driver didn't."

The graphic ad is part of New York City's "Choices Matter" campaign, part of its "Vision Zero" initiative to end traffic deaths and serious injuries on the city's streets.

New York City's mayor announced the effort 18 months ago, with the subsequent launch of 63 separate initiatives to reduce crashes caused by drunk, inattentive or reckless driving.

It remains to be seen whether Portland will be as brash as the Big Apple in its public campaign to reduce traffic injuries and deaths with its own Vision Zero campaign.

But some bicycle advocates hope so.

"We're going to have to figure out how to develop the messaging, fund it and do it in a way that is not patronizing, mean spirited or blames any one user of the street," says Portland's Rob Sadowsky, executive director of the nonprofit Bicycle Transportation Alliance.

The BTA brought its agenda to the emergency listening session last Wednesday at City Hall, called by Mayor Charlie Hales, Portland Bureau of Transportation Commissioner Steve Novick and PBOT Director Leah Treat.

City leaders organized the meeting in the wake of several crashes in May that killed or severely injured pedestrians and bicyclists.

Dozens of advocates attended, tossing out ways the city could increase safety on the streets — not just for bicyclists but for a group that's more commonly referred to as "vulnerable users."

That includes children, pedestrians and people in lower-income neighborhoods, who are 2.3 times more likely to be struck and killed while walking than the average person.

"I think what we're trying to be loud about is equity issues," says Roberta Robles, a Northeast Portland mom and activist with the grassroots group BikeLoudPDX. "How these vulnerable users are treated on the road by people who drive cars — they drive with a sense of entitlement that is dangerous and unsafe."

After the meeting, city leaders announced that their biggest takeaway was a commitment to the Vision Zero initiative.

Used in other cities and countries worldwide, Vision Zero means aiming for zero traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries in the next 10 years, across the entire multimodal transportation system.

City leaders will form a citizen committee that will help shape the Vision Zero Safety Action Plan, which will have two-year and five-year goals and implementation strategies.

On June 17, the City Council is scheduled to consider accepting a grant from the Oregon Department of Transportation for \$150,000 to hire a consultant to work with the committee and develop the plan. The work will accelerate after the council accepts the grant, transportation officials say.

Advocates say the action is a good first step, but the proof is in the pudding.

“We’re trying to hold them accountable,” says Soren Impey, an advocate with BikeLoudPDX. “Portland has a long history of good intentions, but lack of follow through. Actions speak louder than more committee meetings. We really want to see tangible evidence of changes.”

In 2014, there were 28 deaths in Portland due to traffic crashes and there have been 10 so far this year.

Many fatal crashes happen on just 10 streets, which PBOT has designated as High Crash Corridors.

While they represent only 3 percent of the roads in Portland, they account for 51 percent of all pedestrian fatalities.

Improvements include new pedestrian crossing beacons and other safety improvements PBOT will install in coming months; reduced speeds on Southeast Division and Burnside — two High Crash Corridors; and a city-introduced bill in the Legislature, House Bill 2621, which would allow Portland to place safety cameras on High Crash Corridors.

Treat has also made a request to the Oregon Speed Zone Control Board to expedite the process for setting speeds on city streets, taking into account how and when pedestrians and cyclists use the road.

Reaching out

A large part of the Vision Zero campaign is public outreach. Sadowsky, at the BTA, says he’s already begun organizing a series of campaign conversations with various stakeholders.

Rather than rely on public funding for an outreach campaign, Sadowsky says they’re going to see if they can seek pro bono marketing assistance and corporate partnerships — perhaps an ad campaign with the Trail Blazers or Timbers.

The campaign will be broad and ground-based, he says.

As for style, that’s yet to be decided. “We’d love to look at lessons learned from the anti-tobacco campaign,” Sadowsky says, noting that he’s not opposed to being bold. NYC’s “Choices Matter” campaign is “pretty exciting, pretty jarring,” he says.

Besides Vision Zero, Hales and Novick announced a handful of other safety “action items,” including:

- Increased speed enforcement on High Crash Corridors.
- Ask people (starting with city employees) to sign the Bicycle Transportation Alliance’s “Travel with Care” campaign and pledge.
- Increased investments, including \$19 million for transportation safety and maintenance the City Council just approved in the budget last week; and the Central City Safety Improvements project, which will spend \$5.5 million in bicycle infrastructure upgrades downtown and in the rest of the central city.
- Continued advocacy for the photo radar cameras proposed in House Bill 2621, which is in the House Joint Committee on Ways and Means.
- Experiment with diverters, such as movable planters, intended to reduce auto traffic on neighborhood greenways. BikeLoudPDX has lobbied for traffic calming at the Clinton Street Greenway for the past year, since the residential street falls below national and city standards for bike boulevards. PBOT will take recent traffic counts and speed data to the City Council later this summer and evaluate the possibility of installing the diverters.

Bumpy road ahead

At the same time advocates are working with the city, there’s an undercurrent of distrust.

Skeptics are planning protest rides and rallies, and even after last week’s summit, they don’t think city leaders get it.

“The city still is not taking any additional direct action to deal with traffic violence,” says Will Vanlue, the advocate who organized the petition to downgrade Portland’s bike-friendly Platinum status in April, before this year’s spate of bike fatalities and serious injuries occurred.

“No reasonable person sets out to hurt someone else while they’re getting around town,” ee says. “But traffic violence is an ongoing public health crisis. Our transportation department is certainly underfunded, but I think that’s why it’s critical we focus spending almost entirely on safety measures until we can eliminate traffic violence or fully fund our streets.”

Vanlue and others are critical of the fact that Portland’s spending focus has been on “back to basics” paving — “spending millions of dollars to smooth out bumps for people who break the law, speed through neighborhoods, and put families in danger.”

Brian Davis, a transportation consultant with a Portland firm called Lancaster Engineering, also has been watching the city’s bike culture and infrastructure evolve, and is critical of leadership.

“It seems like we wear our bike friendliness on our sleeve less than we did five years ago, and that’s disappointing,” he says.

“Cycling became so tied to (former Mayor) Sam Adams. Adams was really a great vocal leader. Bicycling kind of went the same way as his reputation. That’s a shame. Getting on a bicycle is not a political statement. It’s just a way of getting from Point A to Point B.”

Green Bonds: a new way to pay for clean, green projects

By Steve Law

June 11, 2015

Cleaning up pollution and cutting greenhouse gas emissions doesn’t come cheap.

To make it easier, the city of Portland is poised to adopt a new way to finance environmentally friendly projects.

It’s called Green Bonds.

On June 24, the City Council likely will ask city staff to develop guidelines to sell Green Bonds.

“The Green Bond piece takes an environmentally friendly capital project and matches it up with investors who are interested in environmental concerns,” says Jonas Biery, a city debt manager with the Office of Management and Finance who is working on the new policy.

As soon as next year, Biery says, the city could sell its first Green Bonds. A leading contender: bonds to pay for the city to switch the rest of its streetlights to energy-saving LED bulbs.

The possibilities are endless.

Worldwide, investors seeking “socially responsible investments” now account for about 35 percent of assets managed by professionals, according to a new report by Moody’s Investor Service. Last year, \$37 billion in Green Bonds were issued around the world, three times as much as the prior year, Moody’s found. They’re being used to pay for renewable energy, energy efficiency projects in buildings, sustainable forestry and agriculture, low-emissions transit, and other strategies for adapting to climate change.

So far, investors aren’t accepting lower earnings for buying Green Bonds. But there’s been heavy investor interest, so advocates hope Portland and other issuers can cut their costs down the road by paying lower rates to bond investors.

“That’s the idea,” Biery says, “that as the market develops, investors might be willing to pay more, which translates to a lower interest rate cost to us. That means we pay a lower borrowing cost.”

Corporations also can issue Green Bonds. Iberdrola, the Spanish utility that manages its huge U.S. wind power portfolio from its North American headquarters in Portland, was the world’s seventh-largest issuer of Green Bonds last year, with a \$1 billion offering, according to Moody’s.

Portland-based Lucid Energy is the kind of company that could benefit. Lucid builds small turbines that are placed inside water pipes, using gravity to produce hydropower without killing any salmon. The projects become cost-effective for new pipes, or when water districts dig up and open old pipes to do repairs.

"It's hard to find the capital to do new infrastructure," says Lucid CEO Gregg Semler. Yet the Environmental Protection Agency projects the nation needs \$750 billion in new water infrastructure in the next 20 years, he says.

Right now, there are no mandatory standards defining Green Bond projects or the kind of environmental gains they must achieve. A new set of voluntary guidelines, called the Green Bond Principles, was issued in March by participating parties.

Some cities are arguing that any water or sewer project can be paid with Green Bonds, under the premise that they make water cleaner. Portland wants to do projects with more tangible benefits.

"You kind of can call whatever you want green," Biery says. "We're not on the same page there."

But Portland has been a leader in advocating for renewable energy projects and lowering carbon emissions. The city also has a problem paying for polluted "brownfield" cleanups, especially along prime Willamette River frontage.

Some at the city have wanted to call Portland's offering Climate Bonds, but Biery prefers the more established name of Green Bonds.

It's unclear if Green Bonds will open up new avenues for financing that were closed in the past. But the list of entities using them is growing fast.

In March, a bank in India — the world's third-largest contributor to carbon emissions — issued that nation's first Green Bonds, to pay for renewable energy projects. The United Arab Emirates is exploring Green Bonds to finance green energy projects, in a "Sharia-compliant" way that complies with Islamic strictures against interest earnings, according to Moody's.

Arizona State University sold \$182.6 million in Green Bonds in April. Closer to home, the city of Tacoma, Wash., issued \$21 million worth in March.

"Portland is a place that people look to for innovative ideas," Semler says. "It would be great if Portland could take advantage of it."

The Portland Mercury

No Smoking Tobacco In City Parks Beginning Next Month—But Probably No Consequences If You Do

*By Dirk VanderHart
June 12, 2015*

Starting July 1, there's NO SMOKING in city parks, everybody. But Parks Commissioner Amanda Fritz is having second thoughts about just what the consequences should be if you break the rules.

Fritz has introduced an amendment, scheduled to go before Portland City Council on Wednesday, that would eliminate the specter of a misdemeanor offense if you're lighting up in one of our city's green spaces. Instead, under Fritz's new proposal, you might be asked to leave. And if you don't want to leave? You can stay.

"It's important to the bureau in general and Commissioner Fritz in particular that people who visit the park and are using tobacco are not seen as breaking the law as criminals," says Portland Parks and Recreation spokesman Mark Ross. "The whole intention all along has been to protect public health and to protect our parks from fire danger."

Council voted on the smoking ban back in February, with only Commissioner Dan Saltzman opposing the idea (he thinks it's unenforceable and didn't want cops to be beefing with smokers). That passage was somewhat easier than similar bans in other cities. Seattle, for instance, saw pushback from advocates for the homeless, who worried the policy would end up pushing out people who have nowhere else to go.

Activists here mostly kept mum, but planned to watch the smoking ban's enforcement for inequities or signs homeless people were being targeted. Fritz's amendment might alleviate some of those concerns. It would eliminate the possibility you'd be charged for a crime when park-puffing, or even that you could be issued an exclusion, which can result in arrest if you're caught back on the property.

The new verbiage says a person caught smoking "shall be required to leave the Park in which the offense occurred for the remainder of the day," but even that's a touch strong. Ross says the plan is that parks personnel would ask you to put the cigarette (or e-cigarette, or cigar, or corn silk crudely rolled in notebook paper) out. Refuse? You'll be asked to leave. Refuse? Okay, then.

"If you decide to react that way it's going to be your own decision to live with," Ross says. "It's not gonna escalate to anything beyond [a parks employee] walking away."

The amendment also shortens a grace period designed to educate smokers about the policy. It ends the day the ban goes into effect: July 1.

I've asked Fritz's office for comment on her reasons for the amendment, but it's after 5 pm on a Friday, so....