

The Oregonian

Portland must set spending priorities: Editorial Agenda 2015

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

August 27, 2015

Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who has his succinct moments, outdid himself on Tuesday during a Council work session. Brad Schmidt of The Oregonian/OregonLive reported that he told his colleagues: "We're not very good at saying, 'No.'" He also cut through the fog in saying a proposal to spread office rent burdens more widely among city bureaus, some of which already pay a lot in select venues and would have to pay yet more, was a smokescreen: "That's really what this rate stabilization is about ... to subsidize the renovation of The Portland Building."

Lurking beneath the words in both assertions is a menacing truth: The Council, overseeing the equivalent of a \$3.7 billion corporation, has no apparent game plan. It seems impossible, as if the business were a speeding train without brakes — fueled by unwitting taxpayers. But coming before the Council this year are headline-grabbing civic needs with whopping price tags that could not possibly be paid for if undertaken in a compressed time period. Yet that's how the needs are discussed, within weeks and months of each other, with no priority assigned to them against anticipated revenues.

The lineup, in no particular order: the persistently decrepit Portland Building, whose down-to-the-bones overhaul is pegged at \$192 million; the city's potential liability in helping to clean up Portland Harbor under Superfund, potentially worth millions of dollars; the rundown Veterans Memorial Coliseum, whose necessary renovation could gobble anywhere from \$37 million to \$89 million and depend largely on tax-increment financing and public-private partners (is there a Nike Swoosh to display?); Portland Development Commission's wish to buy the U.S. Post Office in the Pearl District (it was appraised in 2007 at \$45.5 million) and then develop the prized 14-acre site upon which it sits within the financing schemes of urban renewal; more city-backed housing development, discussed by some in the context of a \$185 million bond; and finding a way to pay for millions of dollars' worth of street repairs and upgrades, the subject of multiple financing schemes crushed by public objection. That's to say nothing of the city's planned installation of a large water pipe beneath the Willamette River, a hefty capital project to ensure delivery to the city's west side following seismic disruption; and burying Washington Park reservoirs and disconnecting Mount Tabor's reservoir at substantial public expense.

City Commissioner Nick Fish, in an interview with the editorial board of The Oregonian/OregonLive following the work session, said the city's chief financial officer's help has been sought. "That's why he's here," Fish said. "To come back to us and answer the question: 'What is the consequence of doing all of these things in a five-year period?'"

Fish joins Saltzman in being on the right track. Still, basic questions need full public answering before the city's money manager can fully do his job. It is impossible to talk responsibly about, say, The Portland Building without knowing first whether 1,300 city employees now working in the structure need to be in that location or one location and whether renovation is preferred to building demolition, desertion or sale — all questions whose answers have different money outcomes and consequences for taxpayers. Is it really a forgone conclusion that the building must be saved?

Portland homeowners and renters are no strangers to the kind of basic prioritizing the council needs to do: Measure expensive projects against income and separate what must be done from that which can wait or — perish the thought — be shelved. Rarely is there so much money coming in that all wishes can be met with "yes" in a given year or even two. More commonly, and it is true even as the economy revs up again, those doing the spending must stand back, show frugality and just say no — at least for the time being. The end result is nothing less than a priority list. And that's the first part of having a game plan.

The Portland Tribune

Portland Building options costly

*By Jim Redden
August 27, 2015*

The City Council inched nervously closer to renovating the aging Portland Building during a Tuesday morning work session. The council did not approve the project, currently estimated at \$175 million, but received a briefing that other options are more expensive.

Project advisors said the council has to do something about the city office building because rain is leaking in and it does not meet current earthquake standards. Constructing a new building would cost \$220 million or \$320 million, depending on where it is built. However, the \$175 million estimate is far from final, the council was told. It could cost more, depending on what additional research uncovers.

The council did not set a deadline for making a decision, but indicated it will be made sooner rather than later. At the same time, other future financial obligations include cleaning up the Portland Harbor Superfund site, renovating the Memorial Coliseum and buying the downtown U.S. Post Office.

Willamette Week

Mark Wiener, Consultant to Mayor Charlie Hales, Also Works for Google

*By Beth Slovic
August 28, 2015*

Mark Wiener's dual roles as campaign consultant to Mayor Charlie Hales and lobbyist for ride-hailing company Uber are under scrutiny at Portland City Hall, as reported by WW in recent weeks.

Now it appears Uber isn't Wiener's only corporate client.

Commissioner Nick Fish says Wiener approached him about a year ago, saying he was working for Google, which is seeking to bring its fast Internet service, Google Fiber, to Portland.

It's not clear whether Wiener's work falls under Portland's 2006 rules requiring lobbyists to disclose their contacts with public officials. Google hasn't listed Wiener in its lobbying reports to the city.

Wiener did not respond to WW's request for comment.