

The Oregonian

Buy a sign, fill a pothole? Portland auction to pay for repairs

By Andrew Theen

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Portlanders rejoice: There's now a perfectly legal way to get your hands on an official street sign.

But it'll cost you.

The Transportation Bureau wants to unload dozens of signs, gardening supplies, used first-aid kits, coveralls and other surplus stuff to free up storage space at its maintenance facilities. Officials hope creative Portlanders will open their wallets.

The bureau listed dozens of items Monday on GovDeals.com, an auction website.

John Brady, the bureau's communications director, said the city has amassed quite a bit of surplus items — from the coveralls to weed-whackers and office supplies — through the years.

The Police Bureau sells surplus gear through the online auctioneer, and Brady said the Transportation Bureau decided to give it a try.

"People are always interested in signs," Brady said.

Monday's listings were the first wave of items. It's unclear how long the auction will last or how many items Portland intends to sell.

Brady said a "ginormous" metal cutting machine is one upcoming quirky item he expects could be popular.

"Maybe [it'll be] something for a conceptual artist," he said.

Prospective buyers should know that if they buy an item, they're helping pay for street paving and bridge maintenance, Brady said.

The revenue will go back into city coffers, boosting the bottom line for the bureau's maintenance and operations fund.

Portland has a well-documented street maintenance backlog. Commissioner Steve Novick and Mayor Charlie Hales spent much of 2014 trying to drum up support for a new money stream to pay for paving projects.

That plan fizzled, and the backlog continues to grow.

The Portland Tribune

Novick reflects on his role in paving way for Uber here

By Steve Law

December 8, 2015

As Portland City Commissioner Amanda Fritz lambasted her colleagues last week for “caving in” to Uber while revising the city taxi code — much of her ire addressed to colleague Steve Novick sitting next to her — Novick appeared deeply anguished.

But as Novick sees it, as city transportation commissioner he was stuck ushering Portland’s taxi market into a new era of deregulation, and it was a no-win task no matter what he did.

“It’s not something I sought out, and it’s no fun,” Novick said shortly before Wednesday’s final vote, reflecting on his role in the bitter year-long dispute between traditional taxis and new services using private cars hailed by smartphone.

If he kept Uber out of the market, Novick said, he’d deprive Portlanders of a popular service. And though he’s long been close to labor and professes solidarity with working people, Novick wanted to shake things up in July 2014, when the city switched taxi regulation to an agency under his control, the Portland Bureau of Transportation.

“I told the taxis that early on,” he said.

Novick said he never saw why the city should have a limited-entry system whereby a small number of taxi companies are granted a sharply restricted number of permits to operate here. And he thought the taxi companies had a sense of “entitlement” after being treated like a city utility for the past century.

Nine months after gaining authority for taxi regulation, Novick ended a long freeze on new taxi permits, when the city taxi board endorsed a 64 percent increase in permits, from 460 up to 753.

More deregulation was in the works. As he was interviewing candidates last December to serve on a task force to chart the path toward fuller deregulation, Novick said, Uber started deploying drivers here illegally, defying the city to stop them. “When Uber came crashing into the city, as you recall, I was pretty angry.”

The city slapped fines on Uber, and Novick urged the city to obtain a legal injunction against the San Francisco-based behemoth. But Mayor Charlie Hales wasn’t sure the city would win that fight, Novick said. “I deferred to the mayor on that question.”

Around that time, as Novick tells it now, political consultant Mark Weiner called him, asking him what to do after Uber asked him to represent them as a lobbyist. “I said, ‘Why would you work with people that are jerks?’ ” Novick said he told Wiener. But then Novick gave it more thought, and told Wiener maybe the veteran political operative could “pound some sense into them.”

On Dec. 13, Wiener brokered a secret negotiating session at his house with Uber lobbyists, Hales, Novick and their aides, as later leaked to the Willamette Week newspaper.

Five days later, Hales announced a truce with Uber, though it now appears like a white flag of surrender. Uber agreed to hold off its illegal operations in Portland, and Hales promised the company could legally enter the market by April, under the guise of a pilot project.

Novick said he and the mayor disagreed; Novick didn't want to promise the company could enter the market, only that his task force would craft a path to deregulation. As a result, Novick said, he asked that his name be taken off the mayor's press release announcing the deal.

Novick acknowledges that he made an "error in judgment politically" to advise Wiener to represent Uber, and to hold the secret meeting at Wiener's house. "I can see how it looks bad to people," Novick said.

He insists that Wiener played more of an intermediary role, and didn't convince the mayor or himself to change their positions during that meeting.

"It had to do with our own policy preferences; it didn't have anything to do with Mark Wiener," Novick said.

The mayor, as he has said multiple times lately, didn't want Portland to be left behind while other large cities embraced Uber and Lyft. "I don't think he wanted us and Las Vegas to be the only holdouts," Novick said.

But if Novick was a reluctant arbiter in charting Uber and Lyft's entry into town, it didn't always show.

City lobbying reports show his and Hales' staff granted insider access to the two companies' lobbyists city staff under Novick designed the pilot test and then rewrite the taxi code.

Novick's point person for taxi deregulation, his policy adviser Bryan Hockaday, frequently was seen huddling closely with Uber and Lyft lobbyists during task force meetings. Hockaday, who also was Novick's scheduler, restricted access for Stephen Kafoury, a lobbyist representing a coalition of taxi companies, and for a group of Lewis & Clark law students working on wheelchair access service. Hockaday openly refused to even meet with Darin Campbell, the elected representative for hundreds of local taxi drivers.

Novick denies that he didn't grant much access to Kafoury, and said he knew what Campbell wanted to talk about — limiting the number of permits granted to Uber and Lyft. "We decided that was a pointless conversation to have because we're not going to cap the number of vehicles," Novick said.

The insider access to Uber and Lyft extended to official PBOT reports evaluating progress under the pilot test. For both reports, one midway through the pilot test and one after the first four months ended, the city gave the "transportation network companies" copies of the reports before giving them to news media trying to cover the issue.

Asked why that occurred, Novick said he didn't know. "I don't have an answer for you," he said. "We should not be releasing public documents to private parties before releasing them to the public."

Despite making a series of public pronouncements attacking Uber, Novick has diligently worked to welcome the company to town.

But now that the main work is done, some issues remain, especially whether Uber and Lyft drivers should legally be considered employees deserving employee benefits, as opposed to independent contractors. Novick didn't want to rock the boat and cause Uber and Lyft to abandon Portland if the city required what he admits is the proper level of liability insurance. But the employee issue is another matter, he claims.

"If Uber pulls out because we have to treat people as employees, that to me is a fight worth fighting," he said.