

The Portland Tribune

Comp Plan reaches final stage

By Jim Redden

January 26, 2016

After years of research, discussions and recommendations, Portland's Comprehensive Plan update has finally reached its most critical stage — the time when the City Council will finally consider amendments and approve it.

The first work session begins at 9:30 a.m. today, Jan. 26. Mayor Charlie Hales has asked the council members to identify their proposed amendments before it begins. The final vote is expected in April or May.

The Comp Plan — as it is commonly called — is a state-required land use planning document that will guide Portland's growth for the next 20 years.

"This the most important document the city ever writes," Hales said when the council held its fifth hearing on the update recommended by the Planning and Sustainability Commission on Jan. 13. It is supposed to accommodate 200,000 more residents by 2035.

Today's work session is the first of three where council members will discuss and vote on amendments to address their concerns — and potentially some of those expressed by the hundreds of citizens who have testified in person and writing.

Until now, Hales and the other members have not said much about what they are thinking. One exception is Commissioner Steve Novick, who revealed he supports encouraging more density in at least some residential neighborhoods. According to Novick, increasing urban density helps fight climate change by reducing driving and encouraging transit.

"We in Portland love our neighborhoods and don't want them to change, and I understand that. But we also believe in the environment and reducing our carbon emissions, and that's kind of at odds," Novick said at the beginning of a Jan. 7 hearing on the update.

Novick's statement did not go over well with everyone in the audience.

"Big box apartments in century-old neighborhoods are tearing our city's fabric apart. This need not be," testified Jeff Cole, a member of the Sunnyside Neighborhood Association.

Issues raised during council hearings

Although the council members have not yet submitted their amendments, many issues emerged from the earlier hearings:

- Opposition to significantly increasing density in residential and small-scale neighborhoods, such as the Buckman, Elliot, Eastmoreland and Multnomah neighborhoods. Neighborhood associations in those areas helped coordinate testimony and petition drives for protecting their existing character. Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association leaders are already preparing to challenge the update's zoning for their area at the state Land Use Board of Appeals.

- The future of West Hayden Island, which the Port of Portland purchased as a marine terminal. Environmentalists and nearby residents argue it should be preserved as a natural area, while port leaders and some business associations argue it should be used to improve trade and create good-paying jobs.
- Whether the plan realistically estimates how much future industrial employment will occur — especially in the Portland Harbor. The recommended update currently includes a mid-range estimate for the growth. Port leaders and some business associations say it should be higher, which could require the council to identify more industrial land for development.
- Whether and how to encourage the supply of such alternative housing units as triplexes, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units in existing neighborhoods.
- Support for renter protection and anti-displacement policies in the update. Everyone agrees rising housing costs are squeezing renters and forcing lower-income Portlanders to move, sometimes out of town. But workable solutions are restricted by state laws that prohibit local rent controls. The 2016 Oregon Legislature that starts in February could give the council more flexibility, however.
- Various concerns related to existing parking policies, including pricing at various hours and the lack of required on-site parking for apartment buildings along major transit lines.

Even the future of individual pieces of property could be the subject of amendments. Many witnesses requested the zoning either be changed or remain the same on numerous parcels around town. They include the site of the soon-to-close Strohecker's Grocery in Southwest Portland, Rossi Farms in far Northeast Portland, and even a single lot in a residential neighborhood at Northeast 53rd and Halsey Street.

Find out more

The work sessions are scheduled for Jan. 26, Feb. 2, Feb. 23 and March 1. No public testimony will be allowed during them. The public can next testify at a hearing on the amended Comp Plan update April 14. The final vote should take place in April or May.

To learn more about the Comp Plan update, visit: portlandoregon.gov/bps/57352.

It's going to be a big green year for Hales

By Steve Law

January 16, 2016

There's a green hue to Charlie Hales' bucket list.

Since opting against seeking re-election, Hales has decided to make the most of his final year as Portland mayor, releasing an ambitious list of 35 projects he wants completed by December.

Hales list includes much unfinished business and new initiatives in transportation, police reform, growth management and affordable housing/ homelessness. But 10 of his bucket-list items are in the category of addressing climate change — more than any other topic.

"Since Pope Francis and President Obama have brought the challenge of climate change and the urgency of climate action to the forefront, Mayor Hales not only recognizes the critical need to move quickly to meet Portland's goal of 80 percent reduction of carbon emissions from 1990 levels by 2050, but also has popular will behind his climate agenda," says his spokeswoman Sara Hottman. "Mayor Hales views his climate agenda as part of a global imperative to stave off the catastrophic effects of climate change. That's why climate is one of his signature issues."

Here's a look at the mayor's remaining green goals:

- Make electric vehicles 20 percent of the city's car fleet

This one was a bit of a no-brainer for Hales, as EVs such as the Nissan Leaf save money on fuel and have fewer parts to break down that require repairs.

"It's cheaper for the city to buy, operate and maintain a Leaf than it is for a comparable vehicle," says Michael Armstrong, deputy director of the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. "It's a very good bottom-line decision for us."

The city now owns 58 EVs in its fleet of 488 sedans, or 12 percent. Another 10 Leafs have been acquired plus 18 Ford CMax Energis, which use electricity for the first 12 to 15 miles and then shift to gas. Armstrong figures the city needs only about nine more EVs over the next six to eight months as vehicles get replaced to meet the mayor's goal.

However, that doesn't count the light-duty trucks and other larger vehicles used by the maintenance, transportation, water, sewer and other bureaus, which account for half the city's overall vehicles. Those are not available yet in electric form.

- Double the use of solar energy in city facilities

Solar panels provide only 1 percent of the city's energy supply, but they are installed at 13 city facilities, plus solar water heaters on five more, Armstrong says. The city has already committed to adding solar panels atop the Northeast police precinct, and plans a major expansion of panels at the Southwest Community Center. There's talk of doing an array of ground-mounted panels on Bureau of Environmental Services land near the Columbia Slough. If those all occur, two medium-size solar additions would get to Hales' goal, Armstrong says.

In addition, any time the city does major work on a new roof, significant renovations or new construction, solar will be considered, such as at the Portland Building, the city's largest office building.

"Solar will definitely be part of that design from the start," Armstrong says.

- Move forward on Bus Rapid Transit on Powell-Division

TriMet and Metro are shepherding this project, but Hales hopes to create a new urban renewal district along the bus line to subsidize improvements at major bus stops and assure affordable

housing is preserved or added along the line. There's also corresponding land use changes to be considered in the new comprehensive land use plan.

- Create a community solar program

A good number of Portland homeowners can't add solar panels because of the orientation of their roofs. Also apartment tenants don't have the option of installing solar panels, and there are many commercial buildings that don't have good exposure to solar rays because they're overshadowed by taller buildings.

Community solar would allow those groups to buy into large solar installations and get a share of the power produced.

There's little the city can do to encourage community solar until the Oregon Legislature changes state law. But the Legislature's recently announced coal/renewable energy package negotiated by PGE, Pacific Power and environmental groups includes a provision for the Legislature to do just that, which could occur as soon as next month.

- Issue first Green Bonds

Later this year, the city expects to finish installing LED light bulbs in its street lights. That was financed through a short-term line of credit, Armstrong says. The city expects to issue \$18.5 million in Green Bonds to pay off that credit line and provide long-term financing for the LED conversion. That would be the city's first foray into this new way to pay for environmental improvements.

- Pass residential energy disclosure requirement

Oregon has been a laboratory for creating a home Energy Performance Score, which shows how much power a new house would require, akin to the miles-per-gallon stickers on new cars.

The mayor would like every home for sale or rent to include either the Energy Performance Score or the Home Energy Score developed by the U.S. Department of Energy, Armstrong says. So far, those have been voluntary, but "we're looking for a way to make that standard practice," he says. "That's a discussion we would like to start."

- Clean diesel contracting policy

The city is in talks with Multnomah County and the Port of Portland about potentially requiring bidders on those entities' projects to use construction equipment rigged with diesel filters or newer clean-diesel rigs. That would safeguard the health of neighbors exposed to carcinogenic diesel fumes and improve air quality.

- Implement Fossil Fuel Export Policy

The City Council passed this as a resolution last year. Now city staff are working on putting it into the form of a city ordinance, with more legal teeth and specific provisions.

Other items on Hales' green bucket list include:

- Requiring the use of LEED for large, new buildings in Central City, and
- Establishing a Green building policy for Portland Housing Bureau-funded projects.

Novick's gas tax draws support, opposition

By Jim Redden

January 26, 2016

Commissioner Steve Novick is scheduled to start campaigning for his proposed 10-cents-per-gallon gas tax before he asks the City Council to put it on the May 17 primary election ballot.

He may need to. Although the proposed tax is supported by the City of Club of Portland, it is already opposed by the Oregon Fuels Association, a statewide group representing fuel distributors, retailers, commercial fueling and heating oil marketers. Others are questioning whether Novick's proposal is fair or even legal.

Novick is in charge of the Portland Bureau of Transportation. The first council hearing on his proposal — which would raise an estimated \$64 million over four years and sunset after that — is set for Wednesday afternoon. A few hours before that, at 7:30 a.m. Wednesday, Novick is scheduled to discuss the proposal at the monthly breakfast meeting of the Columbia Corridor Association, an advocacy organization representing industrial and other businesses along the Oregon side of the Columbia River.

The venue choice is probably a good one for Novick. Many CCA members are dependent on truck traffic and know that delays caused by Portland's poorly maintained streets are bad for business. The organization has actively lobbied for more street funds since 2007.

"Our position is generally we need to spend more money on the roads. Every \$1 in maintenance we don't spend now is \$12 we'll have to spend on repairs in the future. But we won't take a stand on the measure until it's on the ballot," says CCA Executive Director Corky Collier.

But ever since the details of Novick's proposal were posted on the city's website last week, doubters have exchanged emails and taken to social media to challenge it. Some of the concerns echo criticisms of portions of the earlier proposals circulated by Novick and Mayor Charlie Hales during the 2104 street fee discussions.

For example, Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association Chair Robert McCullough was quick to note that fuel for heavy commercial vehicles is exempt from the proposed tax. McCullough also complained that the earlier proposals did not fair charge freight trucks for the disproportionate amount of damage they do to the streets.

"The good news is that this tax is collectable. The bad news is that the major road users are largely exempt. This makes the tax even more regressive than the last effort," McCullough says.

Economist Eric Fruits believes the Oregon Constitution restricts money generated by fuel taxes to road projects, meaning the tax cannot fund sidewalk and other safety improvements that Novick is promising. This has prompted former Republican state Rep. Jeff Kropf and others to suggest mounting a ballot title challenge.

Even Collier expects some in the CCA to oppose it.

"There's always those who say, I'm already paying enough taxes," Collier says.

Novick and Hales considered a local gas tax during the original street fee discussions but did not think it had enough public support. They suspended the discussions during the 2015 Oregon Legislature to give Salem lawmakers a free hand at crafting a new transportation funding package, but negotiations stalled because of partisan fighting over a clean fuels program that could increase gas prices up to 19 cents a gallon without improving roads. After the session adjourned, the City Club adopted a study report that called for the council to put a gas tax measure on the May ballot. The report found that 49 percent of Portland's busiest streets are in poor condition and the city needs to spend an additional \$119 million a year for 10 years to improve the pavement system to fair or better condition.

"At the moment, the most technically feasible (funding option) is a city gas tax. A gas tax would generate revenue from most users — including those transporting goods across Portland streets and those who don't reside in Portland — and would discourage congestion and pollution," read the report, titled "Portland Streets: End the Funding Gridlock."

Novick embraced the report as showing public support for the measure and announced he would present it to the council. It was released last week. Among other things, it would impose a 10-cent-a-gallon tax on motor fuels sold in Portland for vehicles not subject to the state's weight-mile tax, which covers commercial vehicles. Although the Portland Bureau of Transportation is studying alternatives for collecting local revenue from heavy vehicles, none are included in the proposal.

The tax would be collected no sooner than September 2016 and would expire in four years. The money it generates would fund a new Street Repair and Traffic Safety Program created within the Portland Bureau of Transportation. The bureau would develop a list of projects to be funded with the money, and the final projects would be selected by a Citizen Oversight Committee, which would also review the spending and present annual reports to the council.

GoLocalPDX

Novick's Gas Tax is Headed for a Vote

By Brendan Murray

January 26, 2016

Last fall, Portland Commissioner Steve Novick, head of the city's transportation department, announced his plan to fix the pothole problem that has long plagued Portland. Now, Novick's gas tax proposal is headed for a vote before the city council and will more than likely on the May ballots in Portland.

The City Council will vote on whether to send the proposal to ballot during their meeting on this coming Wednesday, January 27, and the measure is likely to go to voters this spring.

Even Stuart Emmons, Novick's opponent in his quest for re-election, said that he supports the proposal, though he has concerns with its effects.

“I am for addressing our huge street maintenance problem, it has only gotten worse since some on the City Council bungled the street fee so badly. I am supportive of the gas tax with reservations,” Emmons told GoLocal.

“Trust needs to be restored after the street fee imbroglio with new leadership. PBOT has to get their accounting cleaned up so funds going in are properly spent. I am (also) concerned that a gas tax may tax lower income Portlanders more, as they may use more gas. Vehicles that do the most damage to our streets - busses and large trucks - need to be part of helping to pay for street maintenance. The money from the tax needs to be spent on what is stipulated in the tax language. The gas tax will help, but it will not fix the problem by itself.”

How The Tax Would Be Used

Estimates by Novick and the PDOT say that the ten-cents per gallon tax would raise \$64 million over four years.

Novick asked the Portland Bureau of Transportation to draft a list of possible projects that could be funded by the tax. It includes major street repair projects, funding for safe routes to school throughout the city, and traffic safety improvements in high crash corridors.

In that breakdown, \$35.8 million would be used for paving projects, including more than 30 lane miles of busy street paving. \$8.8 million would be used for safe routes for school projects, which including school crossings, paths and missing connections, sidewalks, traffic calming, and bicycle route connections. \$6.34 million would be used to repair the city’s busiest sidewalks.

The remaining \$13 million would be split among other projects, including improvements to bike lanes, crosswalks and high crash areas.

Polls Show Promise

When Novick first floated the idea of a gas tax in September, critics doubted whether a tax increase would fly with voters, who must approve the plan via a ballot measure. Novick presented evidence later that those naysayers may have been wrong.

According to a poll of 400 Portland residents conducted from September 24 to September 28 by Lake Research Partners, 55 percent of respondents said they would vote in favor of a gas tax. 37 percent said they would vote against the proposal, and 8 percent said they were unsure.

Jim Moore, Director of the Tom McCall Center for Policy Innovation at Pacific University, told GoLocal that while those poll numbers are encouraging, they are far from a guaranteed victory for Novick’s proposed tax.

“With a poll of 400 people 55 percent of the people in favor of it translates to something like 50 to 60 percent in an election, which is definitely a majority, but it could be a razor-thin one,” Moore said. “The numbers he really should have confidence in are the fewer ‘no’ responses. 37 percent translates to about 40 to 42 percent of voters who said they were against it, and that is very good news for the tax.”

Endorsements Incoming

The proposal has also gotten endorsements from influential groups around Portland. The City Club of Portland said they found the gas tax to be “the most feasible” proposal to repair the city’s streets. The Portland Business Alliance, the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods and the Bicycle Transportation Alliance also have indicated they support a gas tax.

Mayoral Candidate Ted Wheeler also told GoLocal in 2015 that he supported the proposal and believes it can help fund street repairs.

Novick said the support from the public and city leaders was “extremely encouraging.”

"It gives me enough confidence to say we've got a good shot at passing it if we work hard," Novick said.