

The Oregonian

Portland parks director won't talk about lead in water

By Brad Schmidt

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Portland parks officials from the top down remained silent Monday about their slow response to high lead levels found in drinking water at a city-owned building that serves children and seniors.

Portland Parks & Recreation announced Sunday that testing from 2011, 2012 and 2013 recorded high lead levels in 11 water samples collected at the Multnomah Arts Center. Officials acknowledged that they didn't take immediate corrective steps but a spokesman said no interviews would be granted until Monday to discuss the breakdown.

But on Monday, parks officials -- including the director, Mike Abbaté -- declined to be interviewed or directly answer written questions about the situation.

"At this time Director Abbaté is not granting interviews and there's no new information," spokesman Mark Ross said in a text message. Ross later said no one at the bureau would be available for interviews Monday.

The Oregonian/OregonLive first asked Portland Parks & Recreation about lead testing Friday. Ross said the bureau doesn't perform widespread testing but didn't release other information, saying it would be forthcoming.

Information disclosed Sunday showed that parks officials found high lead levels in each of five rounds of testing at the Multnomah Arts Center from 2011 to 2013. The building, at 7688 S.W. Capitol Highway in Multnomah Village, serves children and seniors.

The highest lead results, from a drinking fountain, registered at 62.5 parts per billion -- four times higher than the federal "action level." Nine of the 11 high samples were collected in 2012 or 2013, after Abbaté was named the director.

It's still not clear what improvements were made -- the bureau said "some corrective actions" were taken at sinks by 2013 -- or why those improvements weren't made sooner.

Ross on Monday declined to directly answer questions about the "corrective actions" or which water outlets received improvements.

"PP&R continues to look into what exactly transpired and when, and our careful review will answer those questions," Ross wrote generally in an email responding to written questions from The Oregonian/OregonLive. "When we determine the timeline of tests at the priority sites we outlined, we will post that information."

As of last Tuesday, officials installed or replaced water filters at the Multnomah Arts Center although bureau "leadership" didn't learn about the past testing until "late" Friday -- three days after the work had been completed, according to the city.

Ross declined to directly answer questions from The Oregonian/OregonLive about which specific officials are considered "leadership," when on Friday they specifically learned about the issue, or who approved last week's work to install or replace filters.

It's not clear if the recently installed filters have made a difference in water quality. Ross did not directly answer when follow-up testing will be completed or results will be publicly released, although he said it would happen "as quickly as possible."

Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who oversees Portland Parks & Recreation, declined an interview request Sunday.

Ross did not directly answer how many other parks facilities, if any, have been previously tested for lead.

City officials have not announced whether they plan to conduct widespread testing at all park facilities.

The Portland Tribune

Missing middle' housing among open house topics

By Jim Redden

June 7, 2016

Home builders and land-use watchdogs frequently disagree on where new housing should be built.

However, they have recently come together to agree that more multifamily and alternative housing should be built in single-family Portland neighborhoods — much to the dismay of some neighborhood organizations and activists.

The most recent clash is expected to play itself out tonight, June 7, at a meeting of the city's Residential Infill Project advisory committee. It will include a discussion of preliminary staff recommendations.

According to the draft report, a majority of the committee wants the recommendations to encourage more housing options. The question is, does the majority favor prompt action or a phased-in approach?

"Options can be made available that will only change neighborhoods in incremental ways, while helping to better accommodate the additional people expected to move here," says committee member Mary Kyle McCurdy, policy director and staff attorney for 1000 Friends of Oregon, who is in the majority.

Options under discussion include duplexes, triplexes on corner lots, fourplexes, small accessory dwelling units, and cottages built around a common area. They are referred to as "missing middle" housing, and supporters say they will be more affordable than the so-called McMansions currently being built in many neighborhoods.

But skeptics on the committee argue that increasing density will cause more existing homes to be demolished, with no guarantee that most Portlanders can afford the replacement housing.

“The great shortage of affordable houses is in the lower- and middle-income range. New [residential] construction — unless poorly designed, cheaply constructed, and small — is not affordable for these groups,” says committee member Rod Merrick, an architect and Eastmoreland Neighborhood Association activist, who is in the minority.

After tonight’s meeting, project staff will hold a series of open houses over the summer for public feedback, then convene the committee for one last meeting to approve the final report. Some members are already talking about writing their own report if the final staff one isn’t strong enough.

The project was launched last year by Mayor Charlie Hales in response to complaints from neighborhood organizations and activists that replacement houses in residential neighborhoods frequently do not fit in with those around them. They are usually much larger and styled differently from nearby houses, disrupting the character of the neighborhoods where they are built.

Although the project is addressing the scale of replacement housing, the concept of increasing density for lower-cost options has become an even bigger issue in recent months. The City Council already has approved an amendment to the Comprehensive Plan update that calls for more “missing middle” housing in existing single-family neighborhoods.

The Comp Plan — as it is commonly called — is intended to direct development in Portland over the next 20 years, when the population is expected to grow by 200,000 or so people. The final vote is scheduled for June 15, the day of the project’s first open house.

Focus points

The Residential Infill Project originally was directed to explore some, but not all, of the issues surrounding such redevelopments. It is being staffed by the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Their draft report identifies the following areas of agreement on the committee:

- Density should be increased around designated centers and along major transportation corridors first.
- Portland currently allows houses to be built in existing neighborhoods that are too large. Their maximum sizes should be reduced by limiting heights and floor areas.
- Missing middle housing should generally match the size and scale of single-family homes.
- Development should be consistent on all narrow lots and garages and off-street parking with curb cuts should not be allowed.

Survey reveals needs, priorities

As part of the project, an online survey was conducted by the EnviroIssues consulting group between Dec. 8, 2015, and Jan. 12, 2016. Although not scientific, the survey drew responses

from 7,257 people. It revealed significant differences among Portland residents on some issues, based on such factors as whether they own or rent, and how long they have lived in town.

According to a summary of the survey, affordability was a high priority of many respondents. And so is maintaining neighborhood character by addressing the shape, size and scale of replacement houses.

But maintaining neighborhood character was prioritized first by homeowners, those who have lived in Portland for 20 or more years, and those over 45 years old. In contrast, providing housing options for all income levels was prioritized first by renters, those who have lived in Portland four years or less, and those under 45 years old.

The project is not considering such issues as rules for demolition and deconstruction of existing houses, historic preservation, systems development charges and fee structures, moveable homes (e.g., tiny houses on wheels) or changes to community design standards.

The published schedule says public hearings will be held on any proposed City Code changes in the summer and fall of 2017.

Open houses set for summer

The Residential Infill Project has scheduled a series of open houses this summer so the public can learn more about it and give feedback to the staff on the following topics:

1. Reducing the size of houses. Should Portland's single-dwelling rules for height, lot coverages, setbacks be changed and to what extent?
2. Increasing the range of housing types. What is the feasibility and appropriateness of introducing more accessory dwelling units, duplexes and triplexes to single-dwelling zones?
3. Historically narrow lots. What are the appropriate lot dimensions for new development on historically narrow lots and what locations should it be allowed?

The schedule is as follows:

Multnomah Arts Center, 7688 S.W. Capitol Highway, 6:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesday, June 15

Tabor Space, Copeland Commons, 5541 S.E. Belmont St., 6:30-8:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 28.

Historic Kenton Firehouse, 8105 N. Brandon Ave., 6:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 6.

East Portland Neighborhood Office, 1017 N.E. 117th Ave., 6:30-8:30 p.m. Wednesday, July 13.

German American Society, 5626 N.E. Alameda St., 6:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday, July 14.

During the same period, feedback also will be sought through an online open house.