

The Oregonian

City leaders pass resolution declaring Portland first responders 'best in the world'

By Samantha Matsumoto

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Applause, normally prohibited in the Portland City Council chambers, echoed through the room three times Thursday afternoon as city leaders honored first responders for "extraordinary efforts" during extensive rainfall and an explosion in Northwest Portland in October.

Mayor Charlie Hales and commissioners Nick Fish, Amanda Fritz, Steve Novick and Dan Saltzman unanimously passed a resolution during Thursday's council meeting declaring Portland city workers "the best city employees in the world" for their handling of the events.

Hales commended firefighters, police officers and other emergency bureaus for their work during a storm in mid-October that toppled several trees and power lines, leaving several roads blocked and more than 40,000 Portland General Electric customers without power in the Portland area. Portland Fire & Rescue responded to 62 emergency calls over a two-hour period — three times the average amount.

A few weeks later, firefighters faced another challenging call when a gas leak caused an explosion in the Northwest 23rd Avenue shopping district. The blast leveled one building and damaged several others. Eight people, including three firefighters and two police officers, were injured. Because firefighters evacuated buildings, no one was killed, city leaders said.

Each commissioner mentioned the work of firefighter Lt. Peter St. John, who instructed his crew to put on air masks and evacuate nearby buildings. St. John was seriously injured in the blast and continues recovering, they said.

"He is not seeking any type of glory for his work. He would tell you that's just part of his job description," Fish said. "We should remember that Peter St. John is not atypical of all the folks we are honoring and thanking."

Though the explosion was unusual, emergency responders display heroism in their work regularly, Fritz said.

"Every day I am seeing the difficult situations where our police officers and firefighters have come into dangerous situations," Fritz said. "Every day something good is happening because of our police and firefighters."

Sarah Hobbs, who lives about six blocks away from the building that exploded, thanked the firefighters and police officers who responded. She felt her entire building shake during the explosion and is amazed no one died, she said.

"That took the efforts of firefighters and everyone else," she said.

Developers quietly pitch new vision for Veterans Memorial Coliseum

*By Brad Schmidt
November 1, 2016*

A new suitor has emerged for Portland's ramshackle Veterans Memorial Coliseum, quietly pitching city leaders on a massive redevelopment proposal that could require \$100 million in public money.

The hush-hush plan comes from Portland development firm Capstone Partners and includes Marshall Glickman, the one-time president of the Portland Trail Blazers.

Although details are vague, the vision would transform the coliseum into a niche music venue and feature mixed-use redevelopment of surface parking lots.

The emergence of Capstone marks a new chapter in the city's on-again, off-again push to revamp the Rose Quarter and secure the fate of an aging coliseum. The publicly owned building is a money pit, and neither Mayor Charlie Hales nor his predecessor, Sam Adams, has delivered on redevelopment promises.

"The proposal is a big, sweeping redevelopment which includes maintaining the Memorial Coliseum as an event venue," said Commissioner Steve Novick, one of the few people briefed on the plan. "It seemed like an interesting grand vision."

Novick met with project proponents Sept. 16 – a meeting that's not on his public calendar – and said he remembers the proposal requiring as much as \$100 million in public money. Novick said he's not sure if it has a realistic chance of moving forward.

"Asking for significant public investment is a big hurdle," Novick said Tuesday, "and you'd want to see exactly how it pencils out for the city of Portland."

Capstone, which is perhaps best known for developing apartments, has hired high-profile lobbying firm Gallatin Public Affairs to make its case to city leaders. City calendars show Gallatin representatives met with Commissioners Amanda Fritz and Dan Saltzman in September and Commissioner Nick Fish in October.

Hales, Portland's lame-duck mayor, was apparently left out. Lobbying reports show Gallatin met with Jillian Detweiler, a former Hales aide who now works for the city's urban renewal agency, in September.

But Brian Worley, Hales' spokesman, said mayoral staff were "unaware" of any proposals about the coliseum.

"His phone line is open if anyone wants to give him a call or proposal," Worley said.

Gallatin declined to publicly identify its client until being pressed by The Oregonian/OregonLive this week. Neither Capstone nor Glickman responded to interview requests Tuesday.

"Like most Portlanders, Capstone Partners believes the Veterans Memorial Coliseum should be preserved and saved – not ignored or destroyed," Chris Nelson, a Capstone principal, said in a statement released by Gallatin. "Our team is in the early stages of developing a renovation plan that honors its place as a national treasure and restores the venue to make it economically viable and culturally relevant again."

It's not clear how much support the concept has inside City Hall. Messages left this week for Saltzman and Fritz weren't returned.

Fish, however, is optimistic.

"The vision they laid out was very promising in his mind," said Sonia Schmanski, Fish's chief of staff. "Moving forward he'll be looking for a proposal that satisfies his long-term priorities of funding, preservation and restoration of the building."

City officials have struggled for decades to figure out the coliseum's future.

Built in 1960, the coliseum is a favorite among architects who admire its glass façade and mid-century design. It became home to the Trail Blazers basketball team from 1970 and 1995 but has been relegated to second-fiddle status since the Moda Center opened next door.

In 2009, Portland's mayor considered tearing down the building to make room for a minor-league baseball stadium. Adams dropped that plan and community leaders later slammed a broader redevelopment proposal pitched by the Blazers, saying it lacked character. Adams also failed in his effort to renovate the coliseum for its main tenant, the Portland Winterhawks hockey team.

Hales inherited the mess in 2013. He promised to find a solution but also couldn't deliver. Developer Doug Oblatz pitched the coliseum as an indoor track facility but plans went nowhere.

Last year, an outside consultant said renovation could cost between \$35 million and \$143 million, depending on how the building is used. Demolition would cost an estimated \$14 million.

Upgrading the coliseum as a music or sporting venue could cost \$91.1 million, according to the city's 2015 report. So-called "strategic market enhancements" could include a renovated concourse, new and reconfigured seating, plus replacing the curtain system covering the coliseum's glass walls.

Those improvements could help the coliseum draw nearly 240,000 paid customers each year. But annual income would hover at about \$250,000, leaving unanswered how the city could recoup any large-scale public investment.

Mayor-elect Ted Wheeler has met with Glickman, as well as other developers, who have offered "interesting but competing visions," spokesman Michael Cox said.

"As mayor, Ted wants to ring the starting bell and get a formal process going that allows the community to weigh these and other competing ideas for that part of the city," Cox said in a statement.

Novick said Capstone's pitch focused on a niche music venue for 5,000 to 7,000 concert-goers. He said he couldn't remember whether the Winterhawks would remain in the coliseum but thinks that's included in the plan.

Capstone leaders have been careful to keep details close. In response to public records requests, several City Council offices said they didn't receive anything in writing from Capstone or Gallatin.

In its statement, Capstone said the company is now focused on getting advice from city and community leaders to ensure it has an economically viable plan.

"If this idea moves ahead," Nelson said, "our team will be prepared to respond to a comprehensive and transparent public process led by the city of Portland."