

The Oregonian

Portland homeowners win reprieve from maintaining city's trees

By Jessica Floum

March 7, 2017

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler plans to quash an effort by city bureaucrats to quietly expand homeowners' responsibilities to care for trees on city-owned land.

The proposed new rule would have required Portland property owners to cut down dangerous trees on city property adjacent to their land, even if the trees were located far from the private property.

A spokesman for Wheeler says he plans to pull the proposed rule and have city employees rewrite it before bringing it back to the City Council for a vote.

City planners had embedded the rule change in [a package of innocuous technical fixes](#) to the city's tree code presented to the City Council last week.

But, alerted to the rule expansion by a news story in The Oregonian/OregonLive that morning, Commissioner Nick Fish insisted the vote on that package be delayed so the public could weigh in.

Now Wheeler's office says the mayor will work with Fish and parks Commissioner Amanda Fritz to rework the amendments.

Wheeler will be "amending those items on the floor and taking them back to our offices to do more work," mayoral spokesman Michael Cox said.

Commissioners are scheduled to vote on the regulatory package next week.

A spokeswoman representing the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and Portland Parks & Recreation's Urban Forestry department asserted the proposed change was a technical one meant to "clarify" property owners' responsibilities and that there was "no expansion."

"The business before council is a technical amendment designed to more clearly explain the relevant portions of the code relating to homeowners and tree care," Eden Dabbs wrote in an email to The Oregonian/OregonLive last week.

The plain language of the current and proposed rules made it clear, however, that more homeowners would have been made responsible for more trees.

The change would have, for instance, cost at least three Southwest Portland homeowners [as much as \\$3,500](#) by making clear that they are responsible for cutting down trees more than 50 feet away and inaccessible from their property.

Current code requires property owners to take care of dying or dangerous trees on their own property, "any adjacent sidewalks, planting strips and trees fronting or upon such private property."

The changes would have added "adjacent unimproved or partially-improved rights-of-way" to the places where private property owners are required to remove problem trees.

Rita Snodgrass and Kathleen Ward said when they received a notice requiring them to cut down trees inaccessible from their property and complained to parks bureau workers, officials told

the couple that budgetary constraints drove their decision to require tree maintenance of homeowners.

If the council does not adopt the change, Urban Forestry would face a significant financial challenge, Dabbs said in a statement.

In an email that she italicized for emphasis, Dabbs wrote: "Millions of general fund tax dollars would potentially need to be added to PP&R's Urban Forestry division's budget in order for the city to assume the responsibility of the trees which adjacent property owners now hold."

Mayor Ted Wheeler shows off tiny houses for homeless day before vote to place them in Kenton

By Molly Harbarger

March 7, 2017

Fourteen tiny houses sit in an empty lot next to the Oregon Convention Center waiting for homeless women to move in. Some are little more than a wooden bed in an A-frame, but others have beautiful windows to let in natural light and creative storage space.

They're about the size of a large bathroom in a family home and designed by regional architects tasked with imagining how best to provide short-term housing for Portland's growing homeless population.

Mayor Ted Wheeler toured the houses Tuesday, a day before the Kenton neighborhood association votes whether to allow the houses to be moved there. [Charlie Hales kicked off the idea](#) during his term as mayor, envisioning a community setting where the 14 people live in their houses and share common areas, which include the restroom.

Wheeler said he's optimistic that the Kenton Neighborhood Association will approve the one-year pilot project, but said that if it doesn't, he'll work to find a new location to test out the idea.

In an [interview with The Oregonian/OregonLive at the beginning of his term](#), Wheeler said he wants to move away from the outdoor camping communities that sprung up organically in some places and received permission by the city to exist in the past few years.

Instead, he pointed to the tiny house idea as a better solution.

"This is not permanent housing, this is not necessarily supportive housing, but it's a good next step," Wheeler said Tuesday.

The city [teased the designs in December](#), and Tuesday was the proof of concept.

Wheeler also committed the city to making sure the project is successful, including assuaging residents' fears about security and garbage. The project will be managed by Catholic Charities, which provides many homeless services in the region.

City and Multnomah County officials have been grappling with how to handle the area's homeless population. A 2015 count put the city's houseless residents at more than 3,000. Many advocates and officials expect the [2017 count to show](#) the number to be at least the same if not higher, despite record numbers of people getting help.

Portland arts tax debated at Oregon Supreme Court

By Jessica Floum

March 7, 2017

Critics of the man opposing the Portland arts tax that funds nonprofit arts programs and public school art teachers may argue he has no heart. The truth is, he doesn't.

Retired attorney George Wittemyer filed suit against the City of Portland in March 2013, arguing its arts tax is unconstitutional. His heart stopped in October 2015.

On Monday, the 76-year-old with a mechanical heart device argued his case before the Oregon Supreme Court.

"There were two things I wanted to do" after the high-tech heart machine extended his life, Wittemyer said, grinning after Monday's oral arguments. "One was to come back and finish the arts tax case."

The court will decide whether the tax of \$35 per person for certain types of earners age 18 or older violates Oregon's Constitution. The Constitution prohibits a "head tax."

On Monday, the court's seven justices sought to determine whether Portland's arts tax is in fact a head tax by wrestling with a related, and thorny, question: What exactly constitutes a head tax? The state Constitution does not spell it out. A trial court and the Oregon Court of Appeals both ruled that the arts tax is not a head tax, due to its numerous exceptions, and therefore is legal.

Portland voters approved the tax in 2012. Taxpayers have been expected to pay it every year since, including this tax season. But [many have refused](#).

"It's not a popular tax," Wittemyer said. "It's amazing how many people in Portland have called me asking if there is anything (they) can do to help. I just hope I don't let them down as I have so far."

Taxpayers earning less than \$1,000 and all individuals in households at or below the federal poverty line are exempt from the tax. Income from Social Security and Oregon public employee pensions is not considered taxable under the arts tax rule.

Deputy City Attorney Denis Vannier argued Monday that exempting certain taxpayers based on those criteria made the tax legal.

"We're confident the Supreme Court will reach a good decision in this case," Vannier said.

Wittemyer argued that the tax violates the state's prohibition on a head tax because there is only one level of taxation.

A head tax, he argued, is any tax applied uniformly to a group of people. Excusing anyone who makes less does not create different tax brackets, he said. Instead, it shrinks the pool of taxpayers getting charged a head tax.

"A tax of zero is not a tax," Wittemyer said.

Vannier argued the tax is far from uniform per person, with its many exemptions.

"It really comes down to what are these exclusions based on," Vannier argued. "Are they based on income, property or resources? If they are, it is not by definition a poll or head tax."

The League of Oregon Cities -- a group representing 241 incorporated cities-- filed a brief in support of the City of Portland. So did the Portland Public School District.

The city league argued that requiring "all taxes imposed by a governmental entity in Oregon be proportionally related to each individual person's income has the potential to utterly dismantle how government in Oregon is funded."

Wittemyer asked justices whether they took that argument seriously, noting that the arts tax is the first time anyone has asserted a head tax was being imposed in Oregon since 1910.

"The head tax is unique here," Wittemyer said.

The school district argued the tax is critical to students' success because arts training teaches them skills that benefit their other coursework.

Lewis & Clark law professor John Bogdanski and Portland economist Eric Fruits filed briefs in support of Wittemyer.

After the hearing, Wittemyer complimented the Supreme Court justices' "strict" and "astute" questioning and Vannier's performance.

"I have great respect for the city attorney's office, perhaps not the City of Portland," said Wittemyer, who represented himself in the case. "We're lucky to have that good of an attorney. I just wish they weren't so good."

Wittemyer said he does not oppose funding arts for children. The tax currently pays his grandson's trumpet teacher's salary at West Sylvan Middle School, he said. Nor does the \$35 charge bother him, he said.

Arguing this case is a matter of principle and constitutionality, he said.

"If it's an unconstitutional tax, I don't care for what purpose it's being used," Wittemyer said. "If it's unconstitutional, it ought not to be allowed."

The state's Supreme Court agreed to hear just 8 percent--or about 58 cases--of 708 petitions for review in 2015, court spokesman Phil Lemman said.

The state Supreme Court could take as long as several months to a year to issue its decision on the tax, Lemman said.

To help homeless, keep Portland kind (Opinion)

By Guest Columnist Kathleen Stokes

March 7, 2017

Homelessness results from many varied sets of circumstances, so a one-size-fits-all approach may not have the desired effect. Such an approach can be dehumanizing for the homeless, as well as for the providers. Further, homelessness is such a large and daunting problem that it can cause paralysis with its overwhelming complexity. This can result in great effort expended, but not enough accomplished. The misfit of the industrial-sized approach is seen in the confusion caused by the aborted attempts to use Terminal One or the Wapato Jail as one-stop, mega centers to address the issue.

We have to stop leaving the problem solely to the government or a few overly committed nonprofits and churches. We have to change our way of thinking. Instead, if many individuals become involved in cottage-sized projects that are fitted together in a human-scale mosaic of more individualized caring, we would be able to take little bites at the problem. By solving one individual situation after another, like the grass-roots volunteers who started the Free Hot Soup Program, we can create a sturdy fabric that supports our less fortunate neighbors. This will

reverse marginalization and preserve the dignity of the people who are involved. We will grow an effective result, while simultaneously generating a caring community.

Ever-growing inequities in a society undermine the health of the overall community in many ways. We need our leaders, both public and private, to help to spearhead a new motto: Keep Portland Kind.

We need to respond to Mayor Wheeler's challenge, to join together, rather than allowing the current tension between those who are housed and those who are not to escalate. We need to embrace the idea that, "This is Portland, and we will take care of each other because this is what we do." We need the media to tell the stories of homeless people, to give them names and faces, so that we can connect with them, and respond to their need.

homelessness, we would be coming together to create community in a very Portland kind of way. We would start seeing the homeless as individuals and not as a faceless mass of societal problems.

We would develop a caring community that would override the "them versus us" mentality. Instead, we would embrace the citizen volunteerism that is part of our city's history and culture, to collectively take on responsibility for our community's social welfare.

We've only been able to embrace, "Keep Portland Weird," and maintain its celebration of our idiosyncrasies because, at the core, we have been kind. We need to reinvigorate that character, throughout all levels of Portland, so that we can be sure that in the process of becoming a big city, we still maintain our sense of community and our cherished soul of a small town.

Ask yourself: How can I step out of my comfort zone? What can I do today to help to "Keep Portland kind?"

Willamette Week

Portland Mayor and Police Agree: Protesters Aren't Terrorists, Obviously

*By Corey Pein
March 7, 2017*

On March 6, President Donald Trump signed another executive order, which proclaimed it "is the policy of the United States to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks."

Meanwhile, Trump's government is redefining what counts as "terrorism."

The investigative website The Intercept reported March 2 that the Department of Homeland Security had characterized anti-Trump protests in Portland following November's election as "[domestic terrorist violence](#)."

The source: an unclassified DHS report jointly prepared by the agency's North Carolina field office and its national Office of Intelligence and Analysis. "DHS assesses that anger over the results of the 2016 Presidential election continues to be a driver of domestic terrorist violence throughout the United States—as evidenced by rioting in Portland, Oregon, following the election," the report said.

Portland Police Bureau spokesman Sgt. Pete Simpson says he doesn't believe local police were consulted. "I can say," he adds, "that the Portland Police Bureau does not view demonstrators or protesters as domestic terrorists."

Mayor Ted Wheeler's office derided the idea that protesters posed a threat to national security.

"The mayor would not label any of the recent protests as 'domestic terrorist violence,'" said spokesman Michael Cox. "Even on those rare occasions when a protest in Portland contains incidents violence and vandalism, those incidents do not rise to the level of posing a threat to national security."

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) warned against "carelessly smearing legitimate protests because of the actions of a few."

On March 6, the Mittleman Jewish Community Center in Portland's Hillsdale neighborhood [became the latest Jewish center among dozens across the nation to evacuate because of a bomb threat](#). The Portland office of the FBI said it was investigating possible "civil rights violations."

City Commissioner Amanda Fritz Calls the Portland Building's All-User Bathrooms "Unsafe"

By Rachel Monahan

March 7, 2017

City Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who previously backed the city's efforts to install gender-neutral bathrooms, has behind closed doors been sharply critical of the city's experiment with a multi-stall restroom on the second-floor of the Portland Building.

In fact, she said last month she'd refuse to attend City Council meetings until the Portland Building restroom was changed back to single-gender—a threat she retracted late Tuesday night.

The city converted its [600 single-stall bathrooms in September 2016](#) to allow access for all users. That's intended as a boon to families, elderly and disabled folks in addition to transgender, non-binary and gender-fluid people.

City Council also approved the all-gender multi-stall restroom in the Portland Building last year in an effort to help transgender people feel safer.

But in her Feb. 23 email, Fritz said she was speaking out on behalf of transgender people—and that the multi-stall restroom would only make a transgender person feel more threatened.

She considered the all-user restroom a danger, she wrote, in part because when she stood on the toilet, she was able to see into another stall.

She complained that this was a key issue given that City Council was to begin holding its regular meetings at the Portland Building's auditorium last week while updates are made to the City Hall council chambers.

In fact, Fritz warned that she would not attend those council meetings if the bathrooms weren't changed. (Fritz was out of town for last week's meeting.)

"I refuse to use unsafe restrooms," Fritz wrote in Feb. 23 email. "I will not attend these meetings if this matter is not resolved for me and other bathroom users. If I am afraid, how much more would a trans person using a structurally unsafe bathroom feel threatened?"

There are gendered bathrooms on other floors in the building; it's not clear why Fritz wouldn't use the restroom elsewhere instead of skipping Council meetings, except as a protest.

Fritz responded to questions from WW late Tuesday night, reiterating her concerns but saying that she would continue to attend City Council meetings.

"The 'pilot project' of 'all user' restrooms in the Portland Building, that provide no real changes in the facilities to accommodate that goal other than signs outside the doors, should end," she said in an email.

The national move to create all-user bathrooms is part of an effort to make restrooms a nonthreatening place for transgender people among others.

Fritz outlined the threat as she saw it in the Feb. 23 email:

As you know, I am not an especially tall person. Being alone in the facility, I was able to stand on the commode in one stall and peer over the top of the divider into the next. It is also easy to peer under the dividers.

One in four women are assaulted. My concern is not about an imaginary threat. Women and trans people in Portland have to be hyper-vigilant every day, in our goal of getting through each week without being physically or verbally assaulted. Oregon has the 2nd highest rate of rape and sexual assault in the United States. This is not hyperbole. This is a fact.

The email was sent [a day after President Donald Trump revoked President Barack Obama's executive order](#) requiring schools to allow trans students to use the bathroom of their choice.

After obtaining the emails, WW contacted Commissioner Nick Fish, who brought the resolution to Council last year. Fish says he believes the Portland Building restrooms are safe for transgender people and women.

Fish noted the national context that has "transgender people ...feeling targeted by the Trump administration." He tells WW the city as of 10 days ago had not received complaints from the public about the Portland Building restrooms.

"I think it's so important for the City of Portland to stand on principle," he tells WW.

Fritz's email includes a reference to an attachment to her email, a report on recommendations from the group PHLUSH, which advocates for all-user bathrooms.

The report was not provided to WW.

But PHLUSH program manager Carol McCreary said the new restrooms were neither better nor worse than the old- single-gender bathrooms.

She said the group was critical of the restroom's narrow entrances, lack of sight lines and lack of privacy in stalls—criticisms McCreary said applied "whether they [bathrooms] were all women or all men or all user." McCreary also noted that "no stalls in America are private enough."

In a Feb. 24 follow-up email, Fritz argued for converting at least the formerly women's bathroom back to its gendered status, citing PHLUSH's objections to its physical problems. She also offered another reason for gendered bathrooms.

"Taking away gender-specific bathrooms may have the result that some members of our community can't use either, due to cultural norms or religious convictions," she wrote.

When she sent the emails, Fritz was about to leave Oregon to attend [a diversity training meeting](#) for her entire staff, as The Oregonian reported.

"I am very perturbed that my concerns have been disregarded to date," she wrote in the Feb. 23 email. "If I need to file a Council Resolution directing OMF to return these restroom to gender specific, I will do so."

Portland City Hall, Once in Thrall to Uber, Appears Ready for a Fight (and a Criminal Investigation)

By Rachel Monahan

March 7, 2017

There was a time when Uber seemed to rule Portland City Hall.

In 2014, [the Silicon Valley ride-hailing company muscled its way into the city](#), thumbing its nose at inspectors and taxi companies. [Uber hired a well-connected lobbyist who consulted on the political campaigns](#) of Mayor Charlie Hales as well as City Commissioners Steve Novick and Dan Saltzman—and persuaded the three to support making its high-tech car service legal.

Hales and Novick are no longer in office. And Saltzman is now overseeing a city investigation of Uber.

Last week, The New York Times revealed that when Uber operated illegally in 2014, it used a software called "Greyball" to evade a city crackdown. The app blocked suspected city inspectors, then filled the screens of inspectors' smartphones with fake rides while Uber drivers escaped undetected.

It was no secret even in 2014 that Uber was dodging inspectors. But the report of high-tech deception has brought sharp criticism.

"This is a company that has taken the time at the highest levels to create a special application for the purpose of falsifying the information on their primary app for regulators," Mayor Ted Wheeler said March 6 as he announced a city investigation into Uber's alleged deception.

The report on Greyball sets up confrontations between Portland officials and Uber on at least three fronts.

Investigation

The Portland Bureau of Transportation has launched a 30-day investigation looking for evidence of continuing deception by Uber or its competitor, Lyft. PBOT plans to examine rider complaints, compliance audits and other data on rides, looking for civil or criminal violations. The city could potentially fine companies or bar them from Portland.

City Commissioner Nick Fish wants to know if Uber used Greyball only to block regulators—or if it blocked unwanted customers, too. "Once you have figured out how to effectively redline consumers," he says, "what prevents you from blocking people who live in poorer areas, older adults, people with animals, people with disabilities?"

"We're looking carefully at the use of this technology and will update you as soon as we know more," says Uber spokesman Nathan Hambley.

Legislature

A bill in the Oregon House would remove Portland's authority to regulate Uber. House Bill 3246 would create statewide rules for Uber, disbanding Portland's collection of fees and forestalling city restrictions.

Wheeler's evaluation of the bill is scathing. "While this [scandal] is being revealed," he said, "the very same people are quietly working in Salem to undercut our entire regulatory framework."

At least one sponsor of the bill, Rep. Brian Clem (D-Salem), is already backing away, calling for a carve-out to let Portland enforce its own rules. "My interest is expanding the service to my city (Salem) and the rest of the state and not getting the bill hung up in a political battle over Portland's existing rules," he writes in an email.

Regulations 2.0

If the Legislature doesn't give Uber protections, the company will face a new round of city rule-making this spring.

The City Council is expected to consider small, technical code changes. But the scope could expand if the mayor's office decides it wants to limit Uber's freedom to operate. And the politics look grim for the company: Portland's two newest elected officials, Wheeler and Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, are vocal skeptics of ride-hailing companies.

"Just because you're smart, successful and rich does not mean you are bestowed with ethics," Wheeler said March 6. "This company seems to repeatedly demonstrate that point. These revelations have to shake everybody's confidence in how this company is operating."

Portland Launches Investigation of Uber for Evading Regulators

*By Rachel Monahan
March 6, 2017*

Portland City Hall has launched an investigation of the city's ride-hailing companies, following a report in the New York Times that Uber employed high-tech software called "Greyball" to evade inspectors, beginning in Portland in 2014.

The software created ghost cars that tricked inspectors into believing that there were Uber cars nearby.

That the company was evading inspection were obvious to inspectors in 2014 when they tried to hail cabs, but the mechanism was not revealed until last week.

At a press conference Monday afternoon, Mayor Ted Wheeler and City Commissioner Dan Saltzman announced the Portland Bureau of Transportation will for 30 days examine the practices of both Uber and Lyft, by looking at, among other things, the data the company is required to provide the city as well as complaints from customers.

Wheeler says he hasn't ruled out going to the Oregon Department of Justice or other outside entities for further investigation of criminal or civil violations.

"This is a company that that has taken the time at the highest levels to create a special application for the purpose of falsifying the information on their primary app for regulators," Wheeler said.

The mayor also decried a bill the company is pushing in Salem that could undercut the city's efforts to regulate ride-hailing apps.

"While this is being revealed," Wheeler said, "the very same people are quietly working in Salem to undercut our entire regulatory framework."

Wheeler says he has no evidence either way of that Uber has discontinued the use of its Greyball software.

"I don't know whether or not local laws or state laws were potentially violated," he says. "And we don't have a confirmation yet—at least I don't have a confirmation yet—that Uber has discontinued the practice of 'Greyballing.' So all of these are on the table."

Uber didn't immediately respond to requests for comment, but has said the company has not used the software since 2014.

Yesterday, City Commissioner Nick Fish [called for City Council to subpoena Uber to obtain the necessary information.](#)

Wheeler says the city attorney has not yet weighed in on that plan. Saltzman says he believes the city can get the information it needs to conduct an investigation.

The Portland Mercury

Wary of Lead, the City Might Explore Altering Portland's Water Supply

By Dirk VanderHart

March 7, 2017

Two decades ago, Portland officials made a decision. A recent study had concluded that changes to the chemistry of Portland water could vastly reduce exposure to toxic lead at higher-risk homes, where it regularly leached into the water supply in worrisome amounts.

By introducing more chemicals into the water, that lead risk could be reduced by 70 to 85 percent, officials believed at the time. But they took another path, proposing instead a plan that included less treatment, and prioritized regular monitoring and public education.

Officials maintain that's paid off, noting that the plan has reduced lead levels in old homes by almost 70 percent, bringing Portland in line with federal regulation.

But it might no longer be enough.

After 20 years, the Portland City Council tomorrow appears ready to okay the first steps of what could grow into an \$18 million endeavor, and bring to your tap the kind of robust treatment Portland first considered in 1994.

The council on Wednesday will vote on a two-year, \$664,930 contract with Seattle-based Confluence Engineering Group. If the agreement is approved the city will pay the company to test what sort of additives might be employed to best reduce lead exposure.

And assuming that goes will, Portland could construct a new treatment plant that alters water chemistry—hiking up the pH and alkalinity of your tap water—or coats pipes with a protective film that limits contact with lead.

The city's water, piped to nearly a million customers in Portland and elsewhere, contains no lead. Nor do any of the pipes the city uses to transport it to your home. But Portland water

tends to corrode, and can leach the metal from old fixtures or lead-soldered pipes that snake through old homes, causing higher than permissible lead levels.

That's borne out in regular monitoring. The city tests water in high-risk homes twice a year, and lately has regularly turned up lead levels that hover very close (both above and below) the US Environmental Protection Agency's "action level" of 15 parts per billion. That's a unique distinction among the largest water systems in the country, the Oregonian [reported last year](#), quoting experts who pretty much jeered at what they saw as substandard treatment efforts.

Tomorrow's vote is likely to be low-key, because City Council's first hearing on the ordinance last week contained the meat of the issue. At that hearing, Portland Water Bureau Director Michael Stuhr and other officials laid out the history of the issue, and urged approval of the contract.

"The major source of exposure to lead in Portland area is lead paint," Scott Bradway, manager of the PWB's Lead Hazard Reduction Plan, told officials, "but lead in water is something we want to avoid and minimize."

The sorts of chemicals that might be introduced into the water supply include additives to alter water chemistry—like baking soda, carbon dioxide, calcium hydroxide, and caustic soda. Cities around the country use different combinations of these to keep chemistry in check, officials say.

The forthcoming testing would also explore orthophosphates, which could stop corrosion by creating a film on pipes.

Such solutions, of course, would affect the whole system, as opposed to targeting problem pipes that create lead exposure. City officials suggested the latter option could be more efficient. But it could also cost \$100 million and raise legal problems.

"In our old town, you have lots of old fixtures with old brass, which has very high percentages of lead in it," Stuhr said last week. But he noted, "there are huge legal problems with us spending capital dollars on private homes."

For a water bureau that regularly boasts of the superior quality of its goods, the changes being mulled could mean a diminished product in some customers' minds. A document laying out the treatment proposal says officials will be looking into impacts to "taste and odor" of drinking water from increased treatment. Since Portland regularly juggles between two water sources—the much-touted surface water from the [Bull Run Watershed](#), and groundwater from its [Columbia South Shore Well Field](#)—the city says customers may already be used to variation.

"While we do not have any definitive answers, the potential changes to water quality parameters are similar to what is seen when blending groundwater with Bull Run," the document says. "During these times some customers notice a slight difference in the feel of the water due to increased alkalinity, while the change goes unnoticed to the majority of customers."

Some high-profile customers are on guard—allegedly.

"I've already gotten a few what I'd describe as nervous communications from the craft brewery industry," Mayor Ted Wheeler said at last week's hearing, prompting Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the PWB, to call Bull Run water "the gold mine" for delicious Oregon beer.

"It's the key ingredient," Fish said, vowing to work with brewers on future changes.

Oddly, asked about the "nervous communications" the mayor mentioned, Wheeler's office first said that he only recalled inquiring at the meeting whether craft brewers had been kept in the

loop. Reminded of Wheeler's assertion—just last week—that he'd heard from worried brewers, a mayoral spokesman said Wheeler's "recollections of the communications he referenced are nonspecific."

Just to be safe, the Mercury reached out to roughly a dozen local breweries to gauge their level of concern. Many didn't respond, but we wound up sitting down with Joe Casey, director of brewing at Widmer Brothers Brewing and three associated brands.

Casey expounded on the qualities of water that might affect beer, and praised Portland water for its softness and lack of minerals. Then he said Widmer's not at all worried about potential changes, which could double the water's alkalinity (that is, its resistance to changes in pH) and increase its pH from 8 to 9.

"It's not likely to cause us major problems," Casey said. He noted that Widmer already deals with stark changes to water chemistry, when the water bureau switches from Bull Run to well water, and doesn't notice a difference.

But he also said: "I know brewers who spend a lot more time on water chemistry than we do."

If approved tomorrow, the contract could lead to a brand new treatment facility at the water bureau's existing Lusted Hill facility, five years down the road. First, officials need to be sure they can arrive at a treatment option that works.