

The Oregonian

Portland Parks & Rec. Facing Huge Budget Deficit

By Gordon Friedman

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Portland Parks & Recreation is facing a projected \$6.3 million budget deficit for the coming fiscal year that will all but certainly cause layoffs and closures of park facilities.

“I think it’s safe to say this will be a painful exercise,” Commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees the parks bureau, told The Oregonian/OregonLive on Tuesday. “Everything is on the table.”

Parks & Recreation Director Kia Selley said she expects impacts to employees, services and programs.

The deficit – which Fish called “a persistent and acute structural problem” – stems from the parks department’s rising costs and flat revenues.

Fees such as those paid to rent park facilities or join rec-league sports teams are supposed to cover nearly a third of the annual parks budget, Selley said. Bureau leaders have shied away from increasing fees to avoid pricing people out, Fish and Selley said.

Meanwhile, the cost of employee salaries, health care and pensions rise every year, widening the parks budget gap. A labor arbitration three years ago that forced the bureau to hire about 100 seasonal employees as full-time workers with benefits didn’t help the bureau’s bottom line.

Other costs have mounted. The park rangers budget has increased more than \$1 million since 2014. Equity and inclusion initiatives added in recent years cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The parks bureau’s 2018-19 budget is \$274 million. Most of that comes from the General Fund, the city discretionary fund that pays primarily for police, fire and parks services.

Fish said the parks bureau now is working to “find the sweet spot” where park services are well-funded and remain affordable for Portlanders.

“Long term, we’re going to have to rethink our business model,” he said.

Parks & Recreation submitted its 2019 budget request to the City Council on Tuesday. It noted the projected \$6.3 million deficit but didn’t include a list of potential cutbacks.

Fish said that’s because he’s not ready to have the bureau recommend specific cuts until the Portland Parks Board has more time to weigh in.

The budget request states the bureau will work with Fish and the City Budget Office over the next month to draft “a supplemental document” listing potential cuts.

McMenamins' Crystal Ballroom Removed From City's List of Earthquake-Vulnerable Buildings

By Elliot Njus
February 5, 2019

Portland building officials have agreed to remove McMenamins' venerable Crystal Ballroom from its list of brick buildings vulnerable to earthquakes after the company proved it had undertaken a full seismic upgrade.

The decision comes less than a month before the city will begin to require placards in buildings deemed unsafe, a mandate that owners of so-called unreinforced masonry buildings have said is overly burdensome and based on an inaccurate database maintained by the city.

The West Burnside concert venue is the first property whose owners successfully challenged its listing in the database since the placarding ordinance was passed in October.

Jimi Biron, McMenamins music director, said the restaurant company had embarked on an effort to fully upgrade the Crystal Ballroom in 1996 and it was completed about 10 years later.

But the city's database, which is publicly accessible online, still listed the building as only partially upgraded.

The company's contracted structural engineers had to go through their files, find physical copies of permits for the work and assemble a 42-page appeal with the city, Biron said.

Because the city had approved permits for the work, it would have already had access to many of the required records.

The landmark Crystal Ballroom was one of the most recognizable buildings on the list, and as a result was featured in news stories about earthquake risk and city policies around unreinforced buildings.

"The Crystal Ballroom being paraded around as the poster child of (unreinforced masonry buildings) when we shouldn't have been on the list, that was really frustrating," Biron said.

The appeal, he said, came at some expense to the company, though he didn't know the exact cost. McMenamins has hired the same structural engineers to upgrade all of its buildings in a 20-year timeline.

Alex Cousins, a spokesman for the Portland Bureau of Development Services, which maintains the database, said it should have been updated when the city conducted a final inspection of the upgrade work. But the bureau was unable to locate a record of the final inspection.

"We try to keep the (records) as current as we can, but no system is 100 percent current," he said. "That's why there's a process to work with building owners to upgrade the status of the property. This is the way it's supposed to work."

Cousins said about a dozen property owners since 2016 have appealed and had their property's status updated in the database.

The placard ordinance would require owners of brick and similar buildings to prominently post signs with the disclosure: "This is an unreinforced masonry building. Unreinforced masonry buildings may be unsafe in the event of a major earthquake."

The same warning must be distributed to tenants of the building under the rule, which is set to take effect for most of the buildings in March.

The ordinance has attracted a lawsuit from the Masonry Building Owners of Oregon, a nonprofit coalition of brick building owners, as well as developer John Beardsley's company and building owner Jim Atwood. The plaintiffs argue the sign ordinance violates their First Amendment right to free speech. They're seeking an injunction before the rule begins. A hearing is set for Feb. 26.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People also opposes the ordinance, saying it would reinforce gentrification in historically black segments of North and Northeast Portland. They held a rally in last month against the ordinance, joined by owners of music venues that aren't seismically upgraded.

City Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, who oversees the Fire Bureau, said that agency wouldn't enforce the ordinance because of those concerns.

Mayor Ted Wheeler, who oversees the Bureau of Development Services, said it would continue to enforce the ordinance. It has joint oversight with the Fire Bureau.

Editorial Valley: More Salt, Please

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
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Slowly, but surely, city and state transportation agencies are recognizing that a little salt in their diet isn't a terrible thing. In recent years — most notably after snowstorms in the winter of 2016-2017 paralyzed Portland for days — they have increasingly deployed rock salt on steep roads, highways and icy intersections.

It's still not enough, however.

Streets in and around Portland were a slick, dangerous mess Tuesday morning, particularly on the east side which received less salt treatment from city crews than the hilly west side, according to the Portland Bureau of Transportation's winter website. But that was more than what the Oregon Department of Transportation did for the state roads it maintains in the metro area. ODOT didn't use any salt on its eastside roadways, though it did use salt on a stretch of U.S. 26 on the westside, said spokesman Don Hamilton. The salt, unsurprisingly, turned out to be very effective.

This isn't an instance where East Portland's needs simply went ignored. Oregon's historic aversion to salt and the rarity of snowstorms in the Portland area complicate how to efficiently use limited resources in the best possible way. And the state does not yet have any salt storage units on the eastside, Hamilton noted. The cost for such a facility, where crews can also wash salt off equipment and ensure proper drainage to prevent runoff into rivers and streams, is about \$500,000.

But state transportation officials should make the commitment. While they're at it, they should also reclassify the agency's seven-year-old "pilot" program of using salt around Oregon as a fundamental part of its winter road maintenance strategy. Surely the state, by now, has the data and experience to finally call the question of whether to use salt. The answer should be yes and more.

Willamette Week

Portland Funded Apartments to Bring Back People Pushed Out of Their Neighborhoods. The Building Is Still Mostly Vacant.

By Rachel Monahan

February 6, 2019

City officials feared a nonprofit planned to use its own waitlist for choosing applicants, a potential violation of federal fair housing laws.

A longtime Portland nonprofit housing leader has struggled to fulfill the city's new plan to make amends for past gentrification of historically black neighborhoods.

At Nov. 8 festivities for the 80-unit Beatrice Morrow Cannady affordable housing development in Northeast Portland, Mayor Ted Wheeler and community leaders showed up to herald an accomplishment.

The building's opening was the culmination of a novel restitution strategy aimed at returning people displaced by gentrification and the city's own redevelopment efforts to their North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods.

One problem: The building was empty.

Records obtained by WW show just three people, at most, had been accepted to live in the building at the time of the opening. None had moved in.

And despite applications from more than 1,500 people eager to live in the Beatrice Morrow, the complex was still 70 percent vacant as of Feb. 1.

Given the demand for affordable housing in Portland across the region, the failure to fill the Beatrice Morrow is, in the view of Portland Housing Bureau director Shannon Callahan, "quite unusual." (The Housing Bureau provided some of the financing for the project.)

City officials committed \$75 million in housing investments for reversing gentrification in traditionally black neighborhoods in North and Northeast Portland under a plan begun in 2014.

The city is relying in part on Portland Community Reinvestment Initiatives Inc., a prominent nonprofit.

PCRI is a key ally for a city government that has earned the distrust of black Portlanders over generations. But records show the effort to partner with the nonprofit on what the city calls its North/Northeast neighborhood housing strategy has met with major pitfalls.

Emails obtained by WW through a public records request show a sustained effort by PCRI to abandon the selection criteria for residents adopted by the city as the centerpiece of the effort to address past injustices in the neighborhood.

That policy establishes a rigorous process for people seeking apartments in the Beatrice Morrow to prove their historical connection to the neighborhood.

The Portland Housing Bureau believed the nonprofit planned instead to use its own waitlist for choosing applicants, a potential violation of federal fair housing laws—and warned the group against doing so.

The group also simply stopped trying to lease the Beatrice Morrow for at least six weeks during the time it balked at city and federal policy, emails from city officials say.

It remains unclear why PCRI wanted to abandon the city's preference policy in favor of its own waitlist, and in so doing, potentially violate federal housing law. PCRI's executive director, Maxine Fitzpatrick, claims not to know about the warnings from the Housing Bureau, but she also says the city's criteria was too strict.

Fitzpatrick says she supports the city's preference policy but finds the terms onerous.

"I feel that it's punitive to put people through that," Fitzpatrick tells WW.

Although many of the people driven out of North and Northeast Portland by Portland's gentrification were African-American, federal housing policies prohibit the use of racial and ethnic preferences in selecting tenants.

To comply with federal law, the city established criteria for ranking applicants for housing based on their connection to the neighborhood. The top-ranking applicants were those affected by the city's harmful urban renewal policies.

But this summer, emails from city officials say, PCRI ordered the Beatrice Morrow's leasing agent to close up shop.

Callahan worried that might be a problem. "It is my understanding that you may plan to add to, or to give applicants who appear on a PCRI waiting list priority over those applicants who have been identified pursuant to the city preference policy," she wrote in an Aug. 8 memo to Fitzpatrick.

"Even if I wanted to, I do not have the legal authority to permit partners using public assets to engage in inconsistent leasing practices. I have an affirmative duty to ensure consistent application of city policies and the Fair Housing Act."

Fitzpatrick, long among the city's most prominent black leaders, denies she did anything wrong.

"My commitment to the community and the work that I've done stands for itself," she tells WW. "If you think it makes sense that I would go and deliberately hurt the very people that I've worked so hard to help and support, then I don't think there's much else I can say."

Fitzpatrick blames the city for failing to find people for the homes—and a property management company the nonprofit contracted to handle the lease-up.

The nonprofit's screening criteria differ from the city's in providing preference to people already living in other PCRI buildings and in the standard of proof required to show a connection to the neighborhood.

The city policy certainly adds another layer of red tape to qualifying for housing. But nearby Charlotte B. Rutherford, a second building opened under the policy and developed by another nonprofit, Central City Concern, which held its official opening nearly a month later, on Dec. 4, has already filled 49 of 51 units, despite opening nearly a month after the Beatrice Morrow.

Records WW obtained don't offer a complete explanation for PCRI's push to abandon the city's policy.

But Fitzpatrick also asked the Housing Bureau to look into the case of a PCRI administrative assistant who was having trouble getting approval for an apartment in the Beatrice Morrow.

"We're a low-income housing provider," Fitzpatrick tells WW. "We have always had employees qualify for our housing."

Fitzpatrick says PCRI is now following the preference policy set by the city. She says PCRI has been more successful for the past six weeks in leasing empty units after firing the property management company.

Fitzpatrick has been fighting to address continued rounds of displacement African-American Portlanders have faced.

"For anyone to say we would do anything that would interfere with people being able to move into housing that we fought very, very hard to be able to develop," Fitzpatrick says, "it's like two and two equals zero."

Portlanders Call 911 to Report “Unwanted” People More Than Any Other Reason. We Listened In.

*By Katie Shepherd
February 6, 2019*

As frustrations over street conditions have grown, calls to 911 have changed.

Just before midnight on a wet December evening, a woman working at a downtown 7-Eleven dialed 911 to report what law enforcement officers call an "unwanted person."

A call of this sort is made to 911 by Portlanders, on average, every 15 minutes of every day.

"One guy," she told the dispatcher, "is over there, he put a tent over there. It's very close to our building. It's almost in front of the door."

"He's just camping out?"

"He put like a tent," the cashier said. "A big tent."

"So, I understand why you wouldn't be comfortable with that," the dispatcher replied. "But is he doing anything else?"

"No," the caller said. "No, no, nothing. But we're losing customers and everybody complains."

"OK, we'll come by in between emergency calls and tell him to leave," the dispatcher told the clerk before hanging up.

Was the tent a problem? Of course—ask any business owner or customer. Was it a matter of public safety? Potentially.

Was it an emergency? No.

But she called 911 anyway. And that, according to WW's analysis of the city's 911 records spanning five years, is what Portlanders are doing at an increasing rate when they see a homeless person.

It's understandable. This city's percentage of unsheltered people is second-highest in the nation. Much of the city is feeling fed up and freaked out.

"If the only tool you have is calling the police, then everything is going to look like a police call," says Julie Sullivan-Springhetti, a spokeswoman for Multnomah County, which administers housing and mental health services.

As frustrations over street conditions have grown, calls to 911 have changed. The total number of calls police were sent to is up almost 30 percent since fiscal year 2013, according to call data

WW requested from the Bureau of Emergency Communications and the Portland Police Bureau. But slightly less than a quarter of dispatched calls last year were from people reporting crimes..

Instead, Portlanders are far more often calling 911 when they see a person who frightens or inconveniences them.

Since 2013, calls reporting "unwanted persons" have increased more than 60 percent, according to PPB data. That's the designation dispatchers assign a call when someone has asked a person to leave their property and the person refuses.

Portland police lump together these calls with welfare checks—which are calls to check on the health of a person who has either been unresponsive or is in distress—and other less common non-criminal calls. Together, they classify these as "disorder calls," to distinguish them from calls about crimes in progress.

"We get a lot of administrative-type calls," says Bureau of Emergency Communications director Bob Cozzie. "Those kinds of things are certainly not 911 emergencies, but because they don't know what other number to call, they call 911."

Combined, these "disorder calls" account for half of all calls for police assistance, according to Police Bureau data. Their rise matches the overall growth in 911 calls—in other words, they account for most of the increase in dispatched calls Portland police respond to.

Not only do Portlanders call dispatchers every 15 minutes to report an unwanted person: They call every four minutes, on average, to ask police to intervene in situations where there has been no crime committed.

When Portlanders call 911, dispatchers nearly always send police to respond, unless the caller asks for medical treatment.

Like firefighters, who rarely fight fires and more often respond to medical calls, Portland police have found the work they are trained to do—fighting crime—is increasingly overshadowed by the work they are summoned to do: dealing with the homeless and mentally ill.

"The Portland Police Bureau has not been given nearly enough resources to fulfill its small piece in addressing the homelessness crisis," police union president Daryl Turner said in a recent statement. "It's a recipe for failure to put the burden of the homelessness solution on the Police Bureau's shoulders and then give us insufficient resources to do the work."

The encounters that result from those calls have received an unusual amount of attention this winter.

In part, that's because of a spike in shootings by police: as many in the past four months as in any full year since 2010. But it's also because of a few high-profile incidents that began with a 911 call to report an "unwanted person."

In December, DoubleTree Hotel employees in the Lloyd District phoned the cops to kick out a black man talking on his cellphone in the lobby, even though he was a paying guest at the hotel. On Jan. 6, officers responding to a report of a man asleep on a porch shot and killed Andre C. Gladen inside a stranger's house.

Police receive much of the criticism when these calls escalate. But they are trained to interact with criminals, and are increasingly responding to people in the midst of mental health crises who would be better handled by a social worker.

The Gladen killing has renewed pleas from activists that people stop calling the police on homeless and mentally ill people.

"We're forcing a square peg in a round hole," says former mayoral candidate Sarah Iannarone. "Regardless of your positions on policing philosophically, policing is not social work. Daryl Turner has a bit of a point when he says the police should not be dealing with situations that are public health crises."

Two changes could reduce the interactions police have with homeless people.

The first is simple: Portlanders could call someone other than the cops.

"If people think they should call, they should call [the Mental Health Call Center]," says Leticia Sainz, a program manager at the Multnomah County Health Department. She says people should call the county's crisis line for many situations involving mental health—and the staff can connect them to services, trained psychologists or even the police if needed. "We can get them where they need to be."

Multnomah County has a Mental Health Call Center staffed with experts who can help connect people to mental health and addiction services at 503-988-4888. People can also call the 211 line to find information about shelters and other social services.

The Mental Health Call Center has two units of mobile social workers to dispatch at all times, and three during the busy hours between 4 and 11 pm. (The center gets more than 200 calls each day, Sainz says, so making that call won't always bring a mental health counselor to the scene.)

Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty, who took office in January, is looking at a second fix. She wants to change who the city sends to talk with people living on Portland's streets.

Right now, when people call dispatchers to report an unwanted person, even if they specify it's not an emergency, the city will send a police officer in between emergency calls.

Mayor Ted Wheeler placed Hardesty in charge of the Bureau of Emergency Communications. She's looking to alternative programs, like one in Eugene, which sends a medic and a crisis worker to respond to some 911 calls—like ones to report unwanted persons—that once were handled by the Eugene Police Department.

"Police are not the best first responders for behavioral health issues," Hardesty says. "Our outcomes in Portland have shown that time and again. What we've found beginning to research alternatives is that sending crisis counselors coupled with a medic partner can be a more cost effective as well as a safer response."

Cozzie, the bureau's director, says BOEC is also considering hiring a nurse who can triage calls, walk people through non-emergency medical problems, and even respond directly to some mental health and medical calls.

A single afternoon inside the BOEC call center shows how regularly Portlanders call for police when they see someone living on the streets or struggling with their mental health.

Dispatcher Sandi Goss, a 26-year bureau veteran, starts each of her calls with the same seven words: "911. Fire, police or medical?"

She took a call from a woman considering suicide. Several people called to ask police to check in on a family member who hadn't been seen recently. A few callers asked police to intervene and remove someone in the midst of a mental health crisis.

One person reported 2-foot flames under an Interstate 405 underpass that he said may have been part of a homeless camp. At least three people phoned to report panhandlers standing in the median or on the curb. Another called to let police know about a woman who appeared to be high, stumbling around a downtown parking lot with her pants fallen down around her knees.

"A lot of our calls are mental health issues," Goss says. "On our end, there's not much we can do about that."

To get further inside the mindset that leads Portlanders to call 911 for non-emergencies, WW listened to calls spanning a typical weekend at BOEC. We chose the weekend of Dec. 7.

That was the Friday when Ryan Beisley entered the Fred Meyer in Hollywood. Someone called 911 to report that Beisley was acting erratically and "seemed drunk." Behind the counter of the Starbucks inside the store, Beisley flashed a toy gun at police, who shot him. Beisley—who turned out to be a federal fugitive—survived the shooting and was later booked into the Multnomah County Jail.

That incident is an outlier. Far more often, disturbance calls end like the one made two nights later at 11:56 pm by the clerk at the downtown 7-Eleven at Southwest 4th Avenue and Taylor Street. A dispatcher sent police in between emergency calls to ask someone to leave, and he moved his tent down the street. (Last week, The Portland Mercury reported, the same 7-Eleven installed a shrill buzzer to drive off panhandlers and campers.)

WW asked BOEC to share 10 recordings of the most common types of 911 calls received over that December weekend.

From Dec. 7 to Dec. 9, Portlanders called to report 62 assaults, five rapes and 10 robberies. (Multiple people sometimes call about the same crime, so the number of incidents may be lower than the number of calls.)

Those numbers pale in comparison to the calls to report 298 unwanted persons, request 278 welfare checks and report 209 suspicious people.

None of the callers heard on these tapes sounds vindictive or paranoid. Some sound frustrated. But many others voice concern for the people they're calling about. One woman even gave away a pair of mittens on a cold evening, before phoning for police.

[Here's what it sounds like when this city calls the cops.](#)