

The Oregonian

Blumenauer Bridge breaks ground; I-84 bike, pedestrian crossing to open in 2021

*By Andrew Theen
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Portland transportation leaders and representatives from inner eastside neighborhoods on Thursday celebrated the groundbreaking of a long-awaited bike and pedestrian bridge spanning Interstate 84.

The project, which has been discussed for decades, is now officially called the Congressman Earl Blumenauer Bike and Pedestrian Bridge. The \$13.7 million carless structure will connect the Lloyd and Central Eastside Industrial districts at Northeast 7th Avenue. Crews will soon start working on the 475-foot-bridge and construction is expected to wrap up in early 2021.

Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, Portland transportation leaders, officials from the two neighborhoods and an urban renewal commissioner spoke about the project at a news conference as the roar of highway traffic lingered in the background.

But the news conference evolved into a Blumenauer lovefest. Speakers wore bicycle lapel pins, like the Northeast Portland Democrat has sported for years. Blumenauer, 71, first elected to the House of Representatives in 1996, is one of the nation's foremost advocates for bicycling infrastructure and transit projects.

Eudaly, who oversees the transportation department as Blumenauer once did decades ago, said the bridge is "just one part" of Blumenauer's "ever-growing legacy."

"I don't like to make promises I can't keep," Eudaly said, "but come hell or high water, somewhere on this bridge, there will be a bow tie," she said, a nod to the Portland Democrat's ever-present clothing choice.

Blumenauer, who first learned in May that Eudaly suggested naming the pedestrian bridge in his honor, said it's important to put the bridge in context. "We now fully understand the climate crisis that we're in," he said, "and transportation is the biggest carbon contributor in our region and across the country."

He said that "common sense" projects like this bike and pedestrian bridge are the most efficient and effective ways to make walking and biking safer. "It's good for the environment, it's good for our health, it's good for our souls," he said.

Blumenauer called the bridge a symbol of the city's commitment to a low-carbon future, but also a "magnificent entry" for drivers headed into downtown on I-84. "I suspect that there will be people protesting on this bridge," he said, "I think the impeachment [of President Trump] will be over by then, but there will be something else that inspires the passion of Portlanders to demonstrate."

The bridge will be 24 feet wide and include a 10-foot pedestrian path and 14-foot two-way bicycle track. Emergency vehicles will be able to driver across the bridge if necessary.

Go Lloyd and the Central Eastside Industrial Council, the groups representing the neighborhoods, each contributed \$250,000 for the bridge. The remainder of the project is paid for by transportation fees charged to developers.

The bridge is expected to open to the public in spring 2021.

Willamette Week

Keeping Barbur Boulevard Wide Adds Millions to the Price Tag on a Portland-Area Transportation Measure

*By Rachel Monahan
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But Tigard voters were given a promise.

Three years ago, Tigard voters narrowly approved support for a light rail line, called the Southwest Corridor, that would connect downtown Portland to Bridgeport Village. Metro needs continued support to move forward with a \$3 billion measure it plans to place on the ballot in 2020, with nearly one-third going to build the new light rail line.

Among the promises made during the Tigard campaign: There would be no narrowing of Highway 99W/Barbur Boulevard to build light rail.

Keeping that promise means the Southwest Corridor project will cost \$200 million more than it would otherwise.

That compromise, approved by the city of Portland, Metro and TriMet, reflects the delicate balancing act Metro is engaged in to please suburban drivers and advocates fighting climate change.

It's not clear how much the measure will reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Metro promises to conduct that analysis once the projects become more defined.

But the compromise at Barbur Boulevard comes at a heavy cost, one that critics have issues with. "Is that a transit project," economist Joe Cortright asks, "or is that a highway project? I think that's a highway project."

The Portland Mercury

A New Parks Policy Threatens to Hurt Portland's Poorest Residents

*By Alex Zielinski
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It's just after 1 pm on a bright, cold Wednesday at Sunnyside Park, and several people in knit caps and down jackets carry pots of coffee and cream of broccoli soup to a picnic table. For dozens of houseless Portlanders who live near the Southeast Portland park, this is the start of the best part of their day: A free, warm lunch with friends after a long night outside.

"This is something I definitely look forward to," says Jeff Callicrate, taking a slow sip of coffee and turning his back to the biting October wind. "It's how I stay connected with people. It's how I stay positive."

He waves at a bundled couple as they approach the table, where volunteers with the homeless advocacy group Portland Assembly unpack homemade cookies and sandwiches. Nearby, several men chat about their mornings over cups of steaming soup.

“Last night was bitter cold,” Callicrate says. “This makes those nights more bearable.”

Scenes like this one are happening elsewhere across the city, too. Later in the afternoon, more than a hundred people will gather downtown in Director Park for another free meal, this time provided by the group Free Hot Soup. Around the same time, volunteers with Food Not Bombs will dish out free vegan dinners in East Portland’s Montavilla Park, and the next day, volunteers with yet another organization, Night Strike, will meet at Tom McCall Waterfront Park to serve dinner to anyone in need.

In Portland, public parks have become go-to gathering spots for organizations that offer free meals to the city’s poor communities. But the creation of a new park permit that will be required for any group hosting these “social service” gatherings has threatened to limit the ability of these scrappy, volunteer-led organizations to use public spaces to share food with Portlanders in need.

City leaders say the change is meant to help coordinate social services, while still allowing equal access to public parks for all Portlanders, regardless of economic status. But in a city in the throes of a housing crisis—and with diminishing access to affordable food and health care—restricting free services for those in poverty could exacerbate Portland’s inequity issues.

The new Portland Parks and Recreation (PPR) permit requires that any group that uses public parks to host events that support “improved health, safety, and quality of life” must purchase event liability insurance and pay a \$137.75 application fee for the permit. (If the group applies for a permit at least 30 days before its planned event, that application fee will be waived.) The permit also restricts the number of social service gatherings in parks, with each Portland park only being allowed to host one per week.

Previously, social service events have been required to apply for a generic event permit from PPR, but that rule was only sporadically enforced. Organizations that serve meals on multiple days in a row at the same parks, like Portland Assembly and Free Hot Soup, say that despite not having permits, they’ve always felt supported, not policed, by Parks staff. At least, they say, until 2018.

According to Portland City Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who served as the Parks Commissioner from 2013 to 2018, the permit is the result of a single conflict at one park. When the city created Director Park in 2009, the public plaza at SW 9th and Park was expected to be financially self-sufficient. The city hoped the permit fees associated with renting the space for private events would cover the general maintenance costs.

Then Free Hot Soup began using the centrally located plaza to serve meals every weekday evening. The group didn’t have a permit.

Fritz says Free Hot Soup’s nightly presence in the small park kept other groups from getting a permit to rent out the space, with those groups also citing fears that Free Hot Soup’s popular gathering would crowd out their private events. Without any revenue coming in from Free Hot Soup, this created a problem.

“Parks depend on revenue for a certain amount of its budget,” says Fritz. “That’s the reality.”

Fritz says Free Hot Soup’s gatherings, which often attracted nearly 200 guests nightly, sometimes left Director Park in disarray, leaving unexpected work for park staff the following

morning. Park rangers had also grown tired of having to intervene when groups that had obtained permits for the plaza clashed with Free Hot Soup volunteers about who could use the space.

In August 2018, Fritz was in the process of helping Free Hot Soup find a more permanent, less budget-draining location when Mayor Ted Wheeler decided to redistribute city bureaus among city commissioners. Suddenly, the Parks bureau became Commissioner Nick Fish's responsibility. Fritz says she briefed Fish on the Free Hot Soup quandary, but notes that at the time, Fish was rightly preoccupied with addressing the PPR's broader budget shortfalls.

Free Hot Soup didn't hear anything from the Parks bureau for months and continued serving meals in Director Park. Then, in October 2019, the Parks bureau unveiled the social service permit as a citywide solution to the dust-up at Director Park. Unlike Fritz, Fish says the decision had nothing to do with finances.

"Revenue is not the driver here," says Fish. "The goal was always to reduce barriers to providing these kinds of services, balanced against the need for our parks to be available for all users."

While he's grateful that groups like Free Hot Soup are serving "a real need," Fish says he wants to ensure that all Portlanders have equal access to public parks. That means every group that uses a park needs to follow the same rules.

"It is not an unhealthy thing to require some mutual accountability," says Fish.

"We're always trying to improve the way Parks serve the public," says Todd Lofgren, the deputy director of PPR. Lofgren adds that the new permits will help staff to both better prepare for planned events and refer those needing free meals to planned gatherings at specific parks.

The new rules, and the costs that come with them, won't have the same effect on every social service provider. Groups that already serve people in parks only once a week, as well as groups that have the money to buy insurance, don't expect to be impacted by the permit requirements.

"As a larger organization, this change won't affect us," says Lesley Snider, founder of Night Strike, a nonprofit that, since 2012, has had a permit to run its weekly program in Waterfront Park. "But it could have a big impact on the smaller groups who aren't insured."

If the city begins enforcing the new policy, groups that operate on shoestring budgets—like Free Hot Soup, Portland Assembly, and others—say they'll be forced to shut down, cutting off a critical service to poor people living in Portland.

"This is a revenue problem that's the city's own doing," says Sara Rudolph, a volunteer with Portland Assembly. "And the city's poorest populations have been caught in the crossfire."

Fish says he would never approve a policy that targeted a vulnerable group, and he's dismissed concerns about the new permit by offering to help raise funds to cover insurance costs. As for the groups that are built on a model of serving a daily meal at a consistent location, Fish suggests they simply relocate to a different park every day of the week. (As long as those other parks don't have their own social service gatherings scheduled that week.)

Volunteers familiar with the homeless community say that proposal could do more harm than good.

"Our folks are hyperlocal," says John Mayer, a coordinator with Beacon PDX, another group that serves lunch at Sunnyside Park. "To expect them to hop around and not have a solid place to meet, the city is promoting instability."

A commitment to consistency is reflected in Mayer's work. He previously helped run a weekly dinner program in the basement of the United Methodist Church across the street from Sunnyside

Park. That Wednesday gathering, “Hard Times Dinner,” abruptly ended its 38-year run in September after receiving an eviction notice from the church’s new owner.

Mayer and other Hard Times volunteers formed Beacon PDX as a way to continue serving the Southeast homeless community, partnering with Portland Assembly to make free lunch a weekday staple at Sunnyside Park.

“So much about their lives is unpredictable,” Mayer says of those who benefit from the service. “Giving this community something stable to depend on is the least we can do.”

David C., a regular at the Sunnyside lunches and one of the many Portlanders who lives in a tent, says the gatherings allow him to stay in touch with friends. He also appreciates the relatively rare opportunity to be taken care of. “It’s the people that make this,” he says. “The people who take time out of their day to bring us food and show us they care. That means a lot.”

For some, these daily gatherings are also critical for survival. Craig Bordelon, who lives in a car in Southeast Portland, struggles to live off his monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) stipend of \$200—especially since he doesn’t have a way to cook food. Warm meals in public parks have become an essential part of his diet. “I’d probably get sick or starve without them,” Bordelon says.

Mayer expects the new permit was partially inspired by complaints from homeowners and business leaders who don’t want to see homeless people in nearby parks. He says his group is regularly harassed by Sunnyside Park neighbors.

By instituting the new permit policies, Mayer says, “The city is signaling to the public that those who own a home are worth more than people without.”

Kaia Sand, director of the street newspaper and homeless advocacy group Street Roots, echoes Mayer’s concerns. She says she’s wary of any restrictions to public space that appear to fall along class lines.

“If you have money in this city, we have a lot of spaces where you can freely exist,” says Sand. “But if you don’t have a car or a house, there are very few places where you can exist. When we further limit those spaces, we’re making a city that is skewing towards wealth.”

Portland Assembly’s Rudolph says groups like hers fill a need that isn’t being met by city and county services. She believes if low-income Portlanders had more access to affordable housing—where they could prepare and cook their own food and store perishable items—groups like hers wouldn’t have to use public spaces to feed others.

“We go to where the people are,” says Rudolph. “And right now, that’s outside. We are fighting so hard to do a little to help the city’s poorest people, but [the city] keeps making it more difficult.”

Troy Howard, a volunteer with Free Hot Soup, says his group chose to hold its nightly events in Director Park—a bustling plaza in an upscale part of downtown Portland—to draw the public’s attention to the above-average levels of food insecurity in Multnomah County.

“A big part of our location is to create a spectacle,” says Howard. “To show as many people as possible that others living in this city are food insecure.”

Howard says the new permit program shows that City Hall is out of touch with the needs of Portland’s low-income and homeless residents. He says the program also illustrates the pitfalls of a city government where major bureaus are led by rotating politicians, who may or may not be well-versed in the services their bureaus are expected to provide.

“It’s super frustrating,” says Howard, pointing to the clunky handoff of PPR between Fritz and Fish. “We have been very consistent and reliable from the start. It’s [the city] that has not been consistent, and we’re going to be the ones that pay for it.”

But the smaller social services groups—the ones that are the most threatened by the new regulations—aren’t shutting down without a fight. Howard, Rudolph, and Mayer all say they’d risk arrest to continue serving meals to Portlanders.

“I will welcome being arrested for feeding people in need, if it comes to it,” says Mayer. “We’re reasonable people and we’re doing reasonable work.”

And if the city plans on strictly enforcing the permit rules, a number of the groups say they’re prepared to sue. They wouldn’t be the first social services organizations to challenge a regional government over these types of restrictions. Volunteers in major cities like St. Louis, Houston, Philadelphia, and Orlando have all filed costly lawsuits against their city governments for introducing policies that place limitations on feeding the homeless in public. In 2018, Florida’s 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals decided that sharing food with people in need is a protected form of political expression, ruling that it was unconstitutional for the City of Fort Lauderdale to force its local Food Not Bombs group to obtain a permit to serve food in public parks.

Oregon’s 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which is generally considered more progressive than Florida’s 11th Circuit, has yet to hear a similar case.

Tristia Bauman, an attorney with the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, says what’s happening in Portland is similar to the Fort Lauderdale case.

“When we know people need hot food and the city has provided no alternatives, and we know people will continue to break rules to feed the public—that’s a political statement,” Bauman says. “Any restriction of that could end in a legal challenge.”

While PPR says it will waive the permit application fee for social service groups, Bauman says the restrictions that accompany that policy—like only waiving the fee if groups apply a month in advance and can afford to purchase insurance—could also be interpreted as restricting free speech.

“Portland is opening the door to legal challenges. Why?” asks Bauman. “If the city wants to end food sharing in parks... instead of costly litigation, it could invest in more shelter spaces or creating its own food-sharing program.”

Fish says he’s looked into city programs in cities like Seattle that provide indoor kitchen and dining spaces that can be used by social services groups to serve the public. He’s also spoken with a downtown church that’s interested in providing space for Free Hot Soup. But before looking for permanent solutions, Fish says the bureau will prioritize educating groups about the new permits and helping them to comply with the new restrictions.

Back at Sunnyside Park, the conversation has turned to the autumn weather. A group of men talk about finding new sleeping bags and blankets that would make nights spent outside a little more tolerable.

“It’s getting colder and darker,” says David C., holding his cup of soup. “That’s another reason why these warm meals are so important. If the city is planning on taking this away, it’s going to be a long winter.”