

The Oregonian

Editorial: Farewell too soon to a beloved public servant

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

January 5, 2020

Portland didn't have much of a chance to show Nick Fish its appreciation for his service. The longtime Portland city commissioner announced on Tuesday that he would resign, disclosing that the cancer he'd been fighting since 2017 had grown too demanding. Torn over leaving office early, he said he could no longer work at the level he wanted to, but would stay on until a new commissioner was elected.

As sick as he was, only Fish, for whom public service was a moral compass, could entertain the idea of giving more than he already had. But it wasn't to be. Just two days later, the 61-year-old commissioner died at home, surrounded by his loved ones.

It's a loss felt across this city that he loved and served so well.

In his 11 years as a city commissioner, Fish has been both a stabilizing force, showing professionalism and respect for colleagues and constituents, as well as a passionate advocate for social investments to help the most vulnerable. He campaigned for city and regional bonds to build public housing for low-income families. He prodded his fellow city commissioners to set targets for building apartments with on-site social services, such as drug addiction or mental health counseling, to help those who are chronically homeless. He supported measures to bring more accountability to city government, often aligning with the city auditor even when the bureaus he supervised were among those scrutinized. And he ardently promoted the amenities that elevate life in Portland, from the arts to Portland's parks and sports teams.

The former labor lawyer also had a talent for steering some of Portland's most troubled bureaus out of crisis. Tapped by then-Mayor Charlie Hales in 2013 to take over the city's water and sewer bureaus, Fish helped quell Portlanders' furor over rising utility rates and serial misspending of funds. He formed a task force to develop recommendations for improving oversight and accountability for the utilities and established a new citizens' utility board. And in 2017, he helped negotiate a settlement of a six-year-old lawsuit over misuse of ratepayer revenue.

Fish again showed his ability to make pragmatic decisions after Mayor Ted Wheeler assigned the Portland Parks and Recreation bureau to him in 2018. The bureau, whose rising expenses had been outstripping revenue for years, had relied on general fund bailouts, an unsustainable and irresponsible approach to funding such beloved services. Fish and his bureau director took the necessary but unpopular step of cutting personnel and programs with an eye toward revamping the bureau's revenue model. A larger blueprint for long-term health was still in progress at the time of his death.

The attention and energy with which Fish devoted himself to his job, from talking with constituents to debating with colleagues, reflected his sincerity in serving the public. A seat on the City Council wasn't a stepping stone – it was the destination, and he poured himself into helping build a city that was compassionate, welcoming and vibrant.

Certainly, he made mistakes. Certainly, he and this editorial board disagreed at times over initiatives or actions. But Fish always welcomed respectful argument, recognizing that while people may differ profoundly on what's best for Portland, they can still share a love and loyalty

to the city that should never be discounted. His understanding that an opponent on one day could be an ally the next was a key to his enduring success. That ability to find common ground and build coalitions is also becoming rarer to find in our increasingly polarized city.

In the weeks ahead, the City Council will map out a plan for electing a commissioner to serve out Fish's term. Portlanders will consider and debate who is best to fill his seat. While the council dynamic will change, Portlanders and today's elected officials would do well to reflect on Fish's many strengths: an ability to make difficult choices and fashion compromise; an ear for those whose voices are too often ignored; a genuine respect for colleagues, constituents and those who seek to hold city government accountable. He accepted with alacrity the sacrifices and criticism along with the successes. Those are the attributes of a man who recognized what it meant to truly serve the public, and this city was better off for it. Portland has much to mourn.

Central City Concern closes Portland sobering station, ends associated van service

*By Everton Bailey Jr.
January 3, 2020*

Nonprofit Central City Concern closed its publicly funded Northeast Portland facility where intoxicated people were brought to sober up as an alternative to jail on Friday and ended its roving van service that transported people there.

The agency said the sobering station and the Central City Concern Hopper Inebriate Emergency Response Service, also known as CHIERS, are no longer available. There currently isn't a plan in place to replace them.

The sobering station and van service had operated by Central City Concern since 1985 and was meant to provide a safe space for people to recover from alcohol or drug use. More than 3,000 people used it in 2018 and most spent six to eight hours there, according to the nonprofit. The city of Portland largely paid for its operations.

The closure comes after Central City Concern officials told representatives with the City of Portland, Multnomah, Clackamas and Washington counties as well as other cities and medical service providers last month that they planned to close the sobering station imminently. Nonprofit officials cited concerns for the safety of patients and staff, who they said were no longer able to give the level of medical care required by most people who arrived at the center.

The agency said they received more and more patients in the midst of a mental crisis, agitated from opioid or meth use or a combination of both, leading to increased safety risks.

"More and more, we're seeing people ending up in the sobering center when they should be in places where they can be given medication and a higher level of monitoring until their crisis subsides," Dr. Amanda Risser, Central City Concern's senior medical director of substance use disorder services told The Oregonian/OregonLive in an interview last week. "We don't have medicine, we don't have padded safety rooms and we don't have the resources at the sobering center to do the hands-on intervention that happens in psychiatric centers. It just isn't an acceptable risk anymore."

She said the agency recently implemented new screening criteria for accepting patients that weeded out people at high risk to threaten or harm themselves or others. Patients with a high potential for violence were redirected to a hospital, Risser said.

Risser said the station accepted eight to 10 people a day before the new screening was implemented and but just two to three afterward.

“It’s difficult to close a program that has been such an important part of the community for decades,” Risser said in a statement Friday. “But closing the Sobering Station makes room for a new approach to treating people in crisis and incapacitated by drugs and alcohol. We look forward to supporting our partners in this effort.”

The nonprofit said it is still figuring out what the next steps are for the two dozen full-time and on-call employees who worked at the sobering station.

The agency’s current contract with the City of Portland expires June 30. The nonprofit said it first told the Portland Police Bureau in August that it didn’t plan to renew the deal to operate the sobering center or CHIERS van service.

The Portland Police Bureau announced Dec. 23 that its officers would take inebriated people to hospital emergency rooms.

The nonprofit had contracts for sobering services with Portland and Washington County and sent invoices to all other agencies that transported patients there. The Washington County contract was sent to expire Jan. 21.

More than 2,700 people or around 85% of people who arrived at the sobering center from July 2018 to June 2019 were brought by Portland police. The agency also received patients from law enforcement agencies as far away as Canby, Sandy, St. Helens and McMinnville.

Central City Concern’s Detox Center in North Portland will remain open. Hooper Detox is a subacute center that admits patients voluntarily for medical treatment of their withdrawal symptoms. Patients can stay there for days and receive medications in a center staffed with nurses, physicians, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

Brian Terrett, a Legacy Health spokesperson, said hospital emergency departments have been bracing for the impact of the sobering station closing, but haven’t seen a larger than normal influx of intoxicated patients.

He said hospitals in the area did see a notable decrease in wait times for patients when Unity Center for Behavioral Health opened. Unity was created to relieve the burden on ERs who were ill-prepared to deal with people in the midst of psychiatric distress and needed a long period of intensive monitoring and care. So when those people were no longer in ERs, people with physical injuries and illnesses could move through the department faster.

Terrett said sobering center patients could cause the same backlog since they need to be monitored. Emergency departments are designed to treat people in ERs and then move them to other areas for recovery, he said.

“Any time anything is introduced into that system that’s not designed to be handled in that way, it’ll create challenges and problems,” Terrett said. “We believe the only way to solve this problem is for the community to come together and find a solution.”

“We have said we would be more than happy to be part of that conversation, but again it needs to be a community-wide conversation.”

Memorial honoring Portland teen killed by Saudi student damaged, pedestrian sign knocked over

By Andrew Theen

January 4, 2020

A small memorial on a pedestrian island on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard constructed in the wake of a Portland teen's high-profile death on that busy street in 2016, was damaged and a pedestrian crossing sign knocked over Saturday.

Pictures of the damaged pedestrian island on the thoroughfare near 43rd Avenue appeared on Reddit early Saturday morning. Those photos showed flowerpots placed on the mid-block crossing to honor Fallon Smart completely knocked over. One of two large crossing signs – the one facing west – designed to alert drivers of the midblock pedestrian island, was damaged and sat on the ground. A college student from Saudi Arabia was charged with manslaughter and a slew of other charges in the high-profile hit-and-run crash. Smart was a student at Franklin High School.

A reporter's visit to the crossing early Saturday evening found the crossing sign still splayed across the island, with multiple ribbons tied around the metal pole honoring Smart. The flowerpots had been placed upright, but were in bad shape.

Officer Carlos Ibarra, a police spokesman, said there were no recent reported crashes in the area and he was unaware of the damage. The Portland Tribune reported that a nearby business owner believed a driver struck the sign.

The Bureau of Transportation said it first learned of the damage from the Tribune. Spokesman Dylan Rivera said in an email that the city is taking steps to fix the damage.

Smart's accused killer, Abdulrahman Noorah, is suspected to have fled the county with assistance from the Saudi government, two weeks before he was to stand trial on manslaughter, felony hit and run and reckless driving charges. The Oregonian/OregonLive has reported on that case and the national trend of Saudi nationals facing criminal charges being escorted out of the country in circumstances that federal law enforcement officials believe are orchestrated by the Saudi government.

President Donald Trump last month signed a bill into law that requires intelligence officials disclose what they know about the Saudi government's role in helping its citizens escape criminal prosecutions in the United States.

The Portland Tribune

Portland Design Commission Removes Language Encouraging Developers to Provide Campsites for Homeless People

By Nigel Jaquiss

January 5, 2019

The Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission voted twice for the code change.

The Portland Design Commission has deleted the word "rest" from a controversial code change that would have encouraged developers to include design elements for overnight camping outside new private buildings.

The Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission voted twice for the code change ("Rest Easy," WW, Dec. 4, 2019) before passing its work to the Design Commission.

Oriana Magnera, the planning commissioner who pushed hardest to include the new language, explained that public spaces around buildings often include "benches but not a lot of place to pitch a tent."

"Sitting is brief," she said, "but the reality of the housing shortage is, folks need to rest on a longer-term scale."

At its Dec. 19 meeting, however, the Design Commission took a less expansive view and deleted "rest" from the document it will send to the City Council this year.

Controversial neighborhood reform plan heading back to City Council

*By Jim Redden
January 05, 2020*

A new version of a proposal to increase citizen involvement that sparked a backlast will be considered by the council on Thursday

The City Council will consider extending a controversial process to reform Portland's public involvement system on Thursday, Jan. 9.

During the 2 p.m. hearing, the council could vote on a proposal by Commissioner Chloe Eudaly to form a multi-bureau work group that will review all public involvement provisions in the City Code, and to make recommendation to the council for increasing citizen participation no later than June 2023.

The proposal would also guarantee continued city funding for the seven neighborhood coalition offices that support the 95 neighborhood associations for three years.

Eudaly oversees the Office of Community & Civic Life that has been managing the reform process. The goal is to increase citizen involvement in civic affair. It has so far focused on Chapter 396 of the code, which establishes a formal public involvement process involving neighborhood organizations.

The project is controversial because the first proposal recommended removing all references to neighborhood associations, coalition offices and business districts from the chapter. Many neighborhood activists protested that would undermine an involvement process that has existed for decades. Eudaly argued that would allow the city to better involvement non-neighborhood organizations, such as communities of color that exist across geographic boundaries.

"The code proposed by the code change committee seeks to build on this legacy and to continue opening the doors of City Hall wider. It holds government accountable for delivering racially and socially inclusive outcomes through community and civic engagement, names all people of Portland as who Civic Life is meant to serve, and maintains neighborhood associations, district coalitions, and business districts as essential partners in the civic fabric of the city," reads the November 2019 report to the council on the project.

The council was originally expected to vote on the original proposal last year. Instead, because of the opposition and a lack of support on the council, Eudaly offered the current version, which the council first heard on Nov. 14.

Under the current version, the work group will be formed in January, start a new public engagement process for the project, regularly report to the council on its progress, and make its final findings and recommendations to the council by June 2023.

You can read the November 2019 report at www.portlandoregon.gov/auditor/article/746809.

Metro to honor Commissioner Fish on Saturday

By Jim Redden

January 06, 2020

The elected regional government will offer free parking at five of its parks on Jan. 11

Metro will hold a special "Free Parking Day" on Saturday to honor the late Portland Commissioner Nick Fish.

According to the regional government, visitors to Blue Lake Regional Park, Oxbow Regional Park, Broughton Beach, the M. James Gleason Memorial Boat Ramp and Chinook Landing Marine Park can park for free on Jan. 11 to recognize Fish's legacy in supporting parks and open spaces in the Portland region.

Fish, who was in charge of Portland Parks & Recreation, died of cancer on Thursday, Jan. 2.

"It's hard to overstate the legacy Nick Fish leaves on the Portland region. He was a leader, he was thoughtful, he was indefatigable," said Metro Council President Lynn Peterson. "He advocated passionately for our regional parks system because he understood the value of connecting people to nature. Even as he was undergoing cancer treatment, he worked tirelessly to support the regional affordable housing measure in 2018. He was a mentor and a friend. His legacy touches the lives of thousands of Oregonians every day, and will continue to make the Portland region a better place for decades to come."

Metro operates more than 17,000 acres of parks and natural areas in the greater Portland region, and visitors can learn more about Metro's parks across the three-county region at www.oregonmetro.gov/metro-parks-and-natural-areas.

The Portland Mercury

Commissioner Fish Remembered By Former Colleagues, Friends, Adversaries

By Alex Zielinski

January 6, 2020

For the past 11 years, City Commissioner Nick Fish's office on the second floor of Portland City Hall has been a reliable junction for lively policy discussions, thoughtful conversations between strangers, and nerdy government jokes. But on Friday, as the community reeled from Thursday's announcement of Fish's death, the lights in his office were off and the doors shuttered.

"It's a sad, sad day in City Hall," said Marshall Runkel, chief of staff for Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, whose office sits across the hall from Fish's. "It's a difficult feeling to explain."

Fish was diagnosed with abdominal cancer in 2017—a diagnosis that rarely got in the way of his steadfast commitment to his job's demands. But on December 31, Fish solemnly announced that, due to the growing severity of his illness, he would be resigning from council in 2020.

Fish died at his home two days later. He was 61.

Fish, a New Yorker born into a family of political heavyweights (his great-great-grandfather was secretary of state to President Ulysses S. Grant), moved to Portland in 1996 after his wife Patricia Schechter was offered a job as a history professor at Portland State University. The couple raised two children in Portland.

Fish wore many hats during his 11-year tenure on city council, but he was uniquely committed to constructing affordable housing and sustaining Portland's extensive parks system. Considered a moderate on Portland's progressive council, Fish loved helping the gears of government run smoothly. His family's political roots and own background as a labor attorney made him an eager advocate of democratic process. In his public resignation letter, Fish called his job "the great honor" of his life.

Per the Portland City Charter, Fish's seat will likely remain empty until the May primary election, at which point people can vote for that seat the same time they vote for other races. That plan has to be formally approved by City Council—something expected to take place this week—before moving forward.

A day after his sudden death, his former colleagues, friends, and (at times) adversaries shared with the Mercury their thoughts on the legacy the devoted commissioner leaves behind.

Amanda Fritz, Portland City Commissioner

"He really brought honor to the word 'politician,'" said Fritz, who joined council just seven months after Fish in 2008. "He relished all the things politicians like to do—he liked campaigning, he liked calling people, he liked bringing his kids to events and sharing those experiences."

Fish and Fritz became close friends over their shared decade on the council. Fritz's husband was killed in a car crash in 2014, and Fish, whose mother also died in a car crash, was quick to respond. He showed up at her office minutes after hearing the news, and accompanied her on the drive to the crash site.

Fritz said Fish's commitment to Portland was reflected in his refusal to trade the work for more notable government positions—particularly a certain "high level" housing policy job in the Obama Administration.

"It was his ideal job and he turned it down," said Fritz of the DC offer. "But, his family had settled here in Portland and he felt he made a promise to the city. He wanted to dedicate himself to making this his dream job."

Fritz said that Fish's background in law played a critical role in council discussions, and he'd sometimes point out legal ramifications of a policy decision that even city attorneys had missed. Fish was a middle child, which, according to fellow-middle-child Fritz, explains why he was so committed to forming consensus and helping dueling commissioners get along.

Fritz, who is retiring from city council at the end of 2020, believes it's important Portland fills Fish's seat with someone just as committed to compromise. She said his selflessness served Portland up to the very end.

"If he hadn't been so honest about his cancer, people wouldn't have known about it," she said. "He rarely missed a council session and he didn't let up in terms of his schedule. I really honor him for that."

"It's a huge loss," Fritz added. "I will miss my friend."

Randy Leonard , former Portland City Commissioner

Leonard shared four years on Portland City Council with Fish, a period during which the two men became friends.

"People in politics often use the phrase 'my friend so-and-so' about other politicians, but rarely they are really friends. That wasn't the case with Nick," said Leonard. "He and I continued a friendship after leaving council. I always enjoyed his company."

Leonard, who spent a decade in the state legislature before joining council, said that more than anyone else he served with in politics, Fish admirably "tried extraordinarily hard to find common ground with people."

"That didn't just include legislating—he was the only person on council who went to almost every single after-work event," said Leonard. "I avoid most of that stuff like the plague. Not only did he do it, but he enjoyed it."

When Leonard, a Portland native, took his first trip to New York City in 2008, he asked Fish for recommendations of must-see places to visit. Leonard laughed recalling the long list he received in return—including grandiose spots like the United Nations and public library—but said he visited every location.

"After that visit, I remember thinking, 'This place is incredible. Why would Nick want to leave it?'" Leonard said. "I admired his courage to leave that behind and try someplace completely new. I was really impressed by that. And he truly loved Portland."

Fish's passion for his adopted city gave Leonard a new kind of appreciation for Portland.

But Fish didn't forget his roots. Leonard said Fish had a deep pride of his family's history in politics. He'd often mention how his father, former New York Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., was one of the six Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee who voted in favor of impeaching President Richard Nixon in 1974.

Leonard said Fish would often contrast that decision with today's partisan politics. "He was constantly frustrated that elected officials were no longer holding people in their own party accountable," Leonard recalled.

Israel Bayer, former executive director of Street Roots

Bayer had been working for Street Roots, Portland's focal homeless advocacy nonprofit, for six years when Fish joined City Council with a mission to improve the city's response to homelessness. At first, Bayer was doubtful that the freshman politician could erase the longtime tensions between Portland's business community, developers, and homeless advocates to follow through on his lofty goals.

And yet, just a few years into Fish's tenure, he'd streamlined several city departments to create the Portland Housing Bureau, opened the Bud Clark Commons (the city's first transitional

housing project created for chronically homeless Portlanders), and brought the Portland Business Alliance and homeless advocates—including Street Roots—together to back Portland's first affordable housing bond. The 2012 bond secured 2,000 affordable housing units within Portland city limits.

"Oftentimes, Oregon politicians wait way, way, too long to act on issues," Bayer said. "But Nick, he was well ahead of the curve on housing. He knew this stuff was going to crash in on Portland, and that we had to be ready with a longterm revenue option for permanent affordable housing. He wasn't okay with the status quo."

Bayer said Fish was preparing for the looming housing crisis long before the polls were saying it was a good idea—long before "all politicians were housing advocates."

"He was the first one in this era to say, 'That's not enough,'" Bayer said. "Other people on council were responsive to housing issues, but it was Nick who said, we can't just manage this problem, we gotta find a way to fight it."

Bayer and Fish didn't always see eye to eye, but that didn't sour their working relationship.

"Even when you were mad at him you couldn't be mad at him for long. He made it okay to disagree on one front and work together on another," Bayer said. "We [at Street Roots] never could bring him over on public safety stuff. But he taught us that we can still work together on the things we all agree upon."

Unlike some politicians, Bayer said Fish focused on longterm solutions instead of in-the-moment crises.

"Homeless policies at the city level are always wrapped up in these emergency responses," said Bayer. "But Nick was the individual who not only managed the conflict but started the plan for the next fifty years. The dude was always thoughtful... he was able to stay in the present with his mind also out on the horizon."

Fish had a grounding, almost paternal presence in City Hall, Bayer said. "It felt like if Nick was in the building, things were going to be okay," he added. "He brought dignity to the council." Perhaps more importantly, Bayer said Fish treated people living on the streets outside of the council chamber with the same level of dignity.

"It didn't make him uncomfortable to be around people on the street, people that made others uncomfortable," said Bayer. "He didn't care what social class you were from, it was more about building authentic relationships."

Steve Novick, former Portland City Commissioner

Novick, who shared four years on City Council with Fish, said there's one easy way to honor Fish's legacy in Portland: Shop local. In a brief email to the Mercury, Novick underscored Fish's dedication to promoting local small businesses over national chains.

"If people want to honor Nick Fish, one thing you can do is follow his example on that," Novick wrote.

Kayse Jama, executive director of Unite Oregon

Jama worked closely with Fish on a number of city policies related to Portland's diverse immigrant and refugee community, most recently one that secured funding for an immigrant legal defense fund.

"He was committed to fighting for people who were underrepresented, and never bragged about his accomplishments," Jama said. "He always wanted to listen. The longer I knew him, the more I saw that he really wanted to live his values. He was nothing but a very positive reinforcement for this community."

Jama says Fish's ability to find consensus among commissioners made him the "glue" of City Council.

"He held city council together, and he held this community together," Jama said. "Policy is always important, but showing up for the community is equally important."

Carmen Rubio, director of Latino Network and Portland City Council candidate

Rubio was one of Fish's first hires after he was elected to City Council.

"It came as a surprise," said Rubio, who had been working in then-Mayor Tom Potter's office. "At the time, I was really involved in getting young folks of color involved in the community... having their voices heard. He told me that the things I cared about were things that the city should care about for our future. Equity is really, really important to him."

After Rubio left Fish's office to lead the Latino Network, Fish would regularly check in with her to learn about new issues in the local Latinx community that he could help address. When Donald Trump was elected to office, Rubio said that Fish was the first elected official to call the nonprofit and ask how staff were doing.

"He truly just cared," she said. For years, Fish urged Rubio to run for office.

"I'd tell him I'm not ready for it. He'd say, 'You need to get ready for it.' He'd tell me all the ways that I was ready and that I could do it. He saw things that I didn't see in myself yet. He was a true mentor and friend."

Fish played that role for many former staffers, young city leaders, and even complete strangers, Rubio said.

"There was something about the way he treated people," she said. "People felt like he was their friend even if they didn't know him very well."

Rubio said it was Fish who convinced her in early 2019—when Fritz announced her resignation—to enter the race to fill the soon-to-be-vacant council seat.

"He called me in April and said, 'There's going to be an announcement and a seat will open up. You need to think about this. You can do this, but it's up to you. Just know that I'm in your corner,'" Rubio recalled. "He has been in my corner ever since."

And it's Fish's leadership style that Rubio hopes to emulate in council chambers.

"Something I loved about him was his deep, profound respect for the office and the power of elected office," she said. "He valued the discourse of ideas, but detested negativity and cynicism and personal attacks. We don't need that, especially since we already have that happening at a national level. Ultimately, he wanted to make a city we all love better. I will gladly pick up that mantle."

Marshall Runkel, chief of staff for Commissioner Chloe Eudaly

Runkel, who was first introduced to Fish while working for former City Commissioner Eric Sten (whom Fish replaced in 2008), recalls Fish's sense of humor.

"Dude could be hilarious," says Runkel. "He definitely was a student of political theatre, and his private conversations with staff about what was going on in council... there was plenty of salty language. And no bullshit."

Runkel took a break from politics after leaving Sten's office—and didn't jump back in until running Eudaly's winning campaign in 2016.

"When I left City Hall, I was deliberately unplugging from politics, I was worn out," said Runkel. He was always impressed with Fish's ability to dodge the mind-numbing and, at times, petty parts of politics.

"Nick was always able to get up and above that," Runkel added. "He wasn't an insincere person in what can be a vapid environment. My wife often jokes that I was created in a government laboratory to work for the government. But if anyone was born in a government laboratory, it was Nick."

He was also thoughtful. Runkel recalled inviting Sten and Fish over to visit his new house sometime in the late 2000s—not long after first meeting Fish. The house boasted a retro basement with a built-in bar and shag carpet.

"Nick came over and drank beer and shot pool," Runkel says. Shortly after the visit, Fish bought Runkel a lava lamp as a housewarming gift.

Runkel has long had a photo of Fish taped to the bottom of his office computer screen, a reminder to that Fish is watching—and will always catch a mistake. Runkel has no plans on taking it down. "I need it more than ever now," he said.