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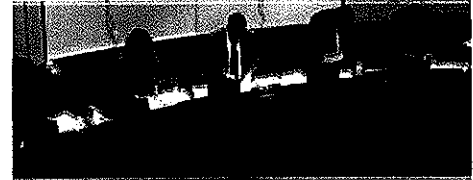
Everything Oregon

My adventures in the Portland City Council

By Kip Kesgard, community blogger

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Flash back to a crisp spring day in Portland back in March 2009, and soccer fans throughout the area rejoiced as the Portland City Council approved a pre-development agreement to bring MLS to the Rose City. It was viewed as the framework of what would eventually be a binding contract between the city and Timbers owner Merritt Paulson and his company, Peregrine Sports, and indirectly with Major League Soccer. This vote followed many months of work by a citizens' task force that worked out thoughts about possible stadiums within the city to accommodate the Timbers and Portland Beavers baseball team.



The Portland City Council during Wednesday's testimony about the MLS operating agreement. Photo by Rick Curwen.

Over the past 18 months, the MLS to PDX plan has undergone many changes, hit many hurdles, and appeared dead then resurrected, all while dealing with the personal relationship dynamics between the city council, the Timbers organization, and numerous residents within the region. During this process, I've gone from being a passionate soccer fan with a small interest in city politics to someone that shares an interest between one of the sports I love and how the city I adore works. I love Portland, and think we're all fortunate to live in such an amazing part of the world: part beautiful, part rainy, part quirky, all unique. I'm also pleased that the overall goal of finding a stadium deal that helps the Timbers and doesn't harm the pocketbooks of the residents has been found, because I firmly believe this agreement benefits a lot of people.

I was able to attend the council meeting back in March 2009 where the initial dealing were approved, and now that things were coming to an end, I couldn't think of any other place to be than the council chambers when the final agreement was being read. I wanted to hear for myself about the agreement from the experts, while also listening to what ordinary citizens had to say about the MLS deal. My wife and I drove into downtown, parking near PGE Park and walking into town to the meeting scheduled for Wednesday, January 27th at 2:00 PM. The fact it was a sunny, pleasant day for January aided our decision to get some exercise before entering council chambers.



Members of the Timbers Army and other interested parties listen to testimony at council chambers. Photo by Rick Curwen

We arrived before the meeting time to find a group of Timbers Army members standing outside, awaiting the discussion. Most of them seemed optimistic about the deal and approval from the city, and arrived to provide support for the team and Paulson while learning more about the contract details. As we walked upstairs to the council room, we encountered a small group of Beavers baseball fans, who were dressed in gear and wanting to testify about the MLS deal as well. I knew there might be dissenting opinions present to talk about the deal, and approximately this group of Beavers fans showed up to ask the council to decline the deal because it was bad for baseball.

One particular baseball fan had some choice words about Paulson before the meeting had even started, which led to some rather boisterous discussion between Beaver and Timbers fans about how baseball was being pushed out of the city because of soccer. Much like other charged discussion about things like health care and measures 66 and 67, things were very tense as both groups tried to make their points while the other side tried to refute them, often loudly.

I do feel badly for baseball fans, and even said to them I was happy to see baseball fans in the audience, because their voices haven't been evident in most of this process, even with it being very public and open to everyone. All of the meetings have been available to the public, and many Timbers fans have spent time and energy to provide support by attending hours of testimony, writing emails, and talking with officials to understand what is going on and provide their opinion about the deal. I do feel there are plenty of baseball fans in this area like myself who want the Beavers to stay here, but many didn't get involved with the stadium situations until very late in the process. If you care about something as important as this, you find ways to get involved and make sure your voice is heard.

As the council members and Mayor Sam Adams entered the room, the bottom floor of the council chambers was completely full of interested parties. The gavel sounded, and within moments, Adams introduced the first reading of the stadium agreement. **The provisions of the seven different contracts were discussed in high-level detail, with the city's negotiating team providing insight and commentary as the council members asked clarifying questions.**



People listen to further testimony at the City Council chambers. Photo by Rick Curwen.

From the onset, it was obvious that each council member had read the documentation, as the early questions were on track and focused on certain agreement points to gain some understanding. There was a long and detailed discussion about the spectator fund, and how it works – each city owned facility has a certain portion of ticket revenue put into the spectator fund for use to maintain the very same buildings. The funds are dedicated for this purpose, and the funds can't be moved to serve another need even if the council wanted to. As much as many stadium critics use the "schools and potholes" argument about funding a stadium remodel, the city is issuing bonds backed by the fund that is dedicated to preserving these facilities.

The sharpness of the early questions soon got off track with naming rights and questions about turf maintenance, but it was still interesting to hear the various provisions of each contract. I admire the job of the city attorneys, who were very well prepared for all inquiries. We also learned that city would retain their rights to approve the stadium contractor, provisions of the stadium plan, while Peregrine Sports assumes virtually all of the risks and cost overruns. The contract provisions put the majority of the risk squarely on Peregrine Sports, putting them on the hook for cost overruns, rent payments, and other expenses while ensuring that the people using the facility were also helping pay for its use.

Paulson took the microphone an hour into the presentation, and thanked the city and the agreement team for their work on coming up with an agreement. He also reiterated his desire to keep the Beavers in town, as he understands their importance to the region. However, he needs a willing and able city or regional government to assist him in finding a site and securing the funds needed. Paulson remains cautious but optimistic that baseball will find a home in the region, but if this deal is approved, the Beavers will be playing elsewhere for the 2011 PCL season.

Members of the Portland Business Alliance, IBEW and the AFL/CIO stepped up and provided testimony to support the stadium deal, trumping the need for ready-made construction jobs in the process of remodeling PGE Park. During the next group of presenters, a representative of Providence Health Systems Oregon took the floor and talked about the wonderful possibilities of the new health clinic being put into the stadium. It was learned that this clinic is being built with funds from Peregrine and Providence, so no city funds are being used for this initiative. The clinic will also be available to the public, providing residents of the area another easily accessible location for serving their medical needs.

The stadium agreement also covered provisions to make the stadium available to the neighborhood and Special Olympics, schedule permitting, while a Portland State University official spoke about the potential the stadium upgrade provided PSU's athletic program. As I listened to all of their testimony, it became very apparent that there were a lot of groups supporting this investment, and the benefits far outweighed the potential risks.

Public testimony began, and speakers ranged from Timbers Army members talking about the soccer

reputation the city already has and what the stadium would do for that profile. It's also hard not to talk about the success of the team up north, which has become nothing short of a phenomenon because of their attendance and performance on the pitch. A Portland Beavers fan asked the council to keep baseball in the city, hoping that officials would do everything they could to keep their team here, while another resident wanted PGE Park turned into affordable housing.

The highlights of testimony for me were two different individuals who testified against the stadium deal. One was a female baseball fan, who while very passionate about the Beavers, didn't understand why the teams couldn't share and felt Paulson was abandoning baseball for soccer. I'm not sure she was aware that Paulson and the Beavers have tried three different locations for a proposed facility, only to be rebuffed each time. The other was a resident who pointed out a MLS stadium guide that proved the PGE Park remodel wouldn't provide enough bathroom facilities, and the whole stadium plan was a fraudulent deal between MLS, the city and Paulson. Mind you, the document was considered a guide, and I would expect that MLS knows exactly what the final stadium design is, and has provided their input or approval as part of this whole process relating to everything.

The testimony wound up, and the council made some final remarks thanking various groups for their assistance during this process. Commissioner Dan Saltzman thanked the Army for their support, not only during this situation but also for the community work that this group continues to do around town. Commissioner Amanda Fritz even mentioned that a Timbers Army member showed up at her house last Sunday, reminding people of the upcoming special election deadline. Saltzman indicated he would provide a yes vote on the stadium deal next week, while Commissioner Nick Fish indicated his support for the deal later in his comment. Fish was especially pleased at the Timbers' commitment to help athletic fields in the region, and announced that Parkrose High School would be the first beneficiary of a special grant to upgrade their sports fields. However, there was no official vote, as Fritz was not prepared to vote after the first reading, so the council will provide their votes next week.

Watching this process has been one of the most interesting, yet infuriating process that I've ever participated in. I'm fascinated to learn about the inner workings of the city, yet remain frustrated at stadium opponents who have tried every tactic to poke holes in this deal despite their claims being refuted. This is how our political process works, as groups work together for the overall goal of improving their part of the world. The success of this plan is because of the work of many individuals, and I personally want to thank these people for their investment in the future of Portland. This approval is a step in the right direction to put Portland on the sports map, and I couldn't be happier to see this deal finally agreed upon. Bring on the MLS!

TIMBERS NEWS! The Timbers will be conducting invite-only tryouts for prospective players this weekend at PGE Park, hoping to find young players for roster spots on the Timbers first team and the U-23 side. The team has provided a list and short previews of some of the more notable players that will be trying to join this year's team in two separate entries posted on the Timbers website today.

Reading the first page of names, apparently there is plenty of buzz surrounding Limam Sedyi, a forward from France who wowed the Timbers' staff during the open tryouts a few weeks ago with his performance. Another name, Maxwell Griffin, is the brother of former Timbers defender Leonard Griffin. **The second list of names** has a goalkeeper from Australia, Robert Simioli, trying out while traveling, and a former Sunset High and Oregon State player following in the footsteps of former Timber Andrew Gregor, Brett Gardner.

Previous year tryouts have brought the Timbers such talented players as Troy Ready, George Josten, and Bryan Jordan, and I'm looking forward to see which of these players will impress the Timbers staff enough to perhaps join the team for the upcoming season.

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