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Soccer supporters believe Portland's scored a pro franchise

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By ERIC ADAMS, kgw.com Staff

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Several city insiders and local media outlets were speculating Wednesday on the fate of a Major League Soccer franchise in Portland.

A news conference was reportedly scheduled by MLS and the Portland Timbers for Friday morning to make an announcement, according to several soccer message boards, including SoccerCityUSA.com and another website devoted to bringing a pro franchise to town.



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According to reports, the press conference was scheduled for 9:30 a.m. Friday at the Portland Hilton between Timbers and MLS representatives.

Supporters hoped that if professional representatives were coming all the way to Portland, it must be to bring good news.

"It looks like this is going to be the celebration we have all been waiting for," Portland resident Jeremy Wright wrote on one message board.

Wright has been a vocal proponent of pro soccer in Portland and even wrote an [editorial](#) supporting the Merritt Paulson project for The Guardian, a British newspaper.

City Commissioner Randy Leonard, a supporter of the proposal, would not confirm nor deny the reports. He did speculate that league officials would "probably not travel to Portland to announce a franchise in Philadelphia."

Philadelphia was not a city in contention for MLS expansion but Leonard offered it as an example.

Oregon Sports Authority chief executive Drew Mahalic would not comment about the rumors, telling KGW "he was not authorized to do so." However, he did reconfirm his support for the proposal.

"From the start, we've been confident the MLS would look favorably toward Portland. It is something we've worked hard for," he said.

Major League Soccer representatives were in Vancouver, B.C. on Wednesday to announce the first of two expansion franchises. Portland is hoping it wins the second and is competing with Ottawa, Canada and St. Louis, Mo.

Portland Timbers owner Merritt Paulson, who is financing the \$45 million pro soccer franchise fee, offered congratulations to Vancouver on Wednesday afternoon.

"On behalf of the Portland Timbers and soccer fans across the Northwest, I congratulate Vancouver on becoming the newest member of Major League Soccer. We hope to have the same opportunity to join our Northwest rivals in MLS," a Paulson statement said.

Paulson did not comment on the Friday news conference involving MLS and the Timbers.

City Council voted 3-2 to approve MLS proposal

Last week, the City Council approved a project proposal to bring a pro soccer franchise to town, renovate PGE Park and build a new minor league baseball team.

The debate lasted most of last Wednesday, with as many as 45 people lining up to testify on the project.

Commissioners Amanda Fritz and Nick Fish voted against the Major League Soccer proposal.

The mayor claimed the proposal would bring Portland "two stadiums for the price of one," since PGE Park would be reused for major league soccer, Portland State football and area high school football games.

"We are in the midst of the worst economy in recent history - this means job losses, tough program cuts, and drastic impacts on our homeless, youth and elderly. My vote today in Council was not about the merits of a stadium deal, but about protecting our dwindling public resources. The case simply hasn't been made to me that there is sufficient economic benefit in this deal," Fish said in a statement. "In this tough economy, we need a major league commitment to parks, affordable housing, jobs and education."

The report said an MLS franchise would also bring other "community benefits" with it, and that it would

elevate Portland's international status at a time when the city aims to become the greenest urban economy in the U.S. **Details:** [Read the city proposal \(PDF\)](#)

But the proposal upped the city's financial obligations by about \$4 million. As recently as last Friday, Leonard told KGW it would cost about \$85 million to renovate PGE Park and build a new minor league baseball stadium in the Rose Quarter.

The report noted that the new \$89 million estimate could also increase after stadium designs and engineering plans were completed.

Do you support the decision to bring pro soccer to Portland?

Under the proposal, Merritt Paulson and his family agreed to pay for the soccer franchise, about \$40 million. Paulson would be the team's owner; the team would pay to rent a renovated PGE Park from the city and those funds would be deposited in the Spectator Facilities Fund.

Support

Oppose

Bonds would be issued to cover the \$89 million and recouped through the Spectator Fund, under the proposal.

Undecided

"The city will own both PGE Park and the new AAA baseball stadium, and the Beavers and new MLS franchise will lease stadiums from the city. These rent payments will help to finance the city's debt obligations," the proposal said.

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The new minor league stadium would seat about 9,000 people at the site of Memorial Coliseum in Rose Quarter.

Paulson hailed the city's proposal, calling it a "good deal for the city and for taxpayers."

► **More:** [Merritt Paulson statement on soccer proposal \(PDF\)](#)

"If you are a worker, this creates jobs; if you are a taxpayer, this protects you from risk. If you are a fan, this means even better soccer and baseball ... If you love Portland, as I do, this revitalizes an area of the city ripe for renewal and showcases Portland to the nation and world," Paulson said.

In the deal, the Paulson family has reportedly agreed to personally guarantee to pay any cost overruns the city may accrue to convert PGE Park into a Major League Soccer stadium.

Currently, the Portland Timbers minor league soccer team and Portland Beavers minor league baseball team share the stadium.

The Paulson guarantee would also apply to construction costs toward a new baseball stadium for the Beavers.

"It's great for soccer fans; it's great for baseball fans ... it's great for the community and the economy," he said. "Hopefully, we'll have something to formally announce soon."

KGW Reporter Randy Neves contributed to this report.