

# Portland Timbers go big time in 2011

by Mark Larabee, *The Oregonian*  
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Bruce Ely/*The Oregonian*Merritt Paulson (center) owner and president of the Portland Timbers,

Major League Soccer Commissioner Don Garber (left) along with Portland city official Randy Leonard announce that Portland has won its bid for a Major League Soccer team on Friday. League officials joined new franchise owner Merritt Paulson for the widely expected announcement. The team expects to begin play in 2011 and will be known as the Timbers, sustaining the name of Paulson's United Soccer League franchise.

You can reserve tickets to the Portland Timbers' first Major League Soccer season in 2011 by putting down a \$50 deposit. If you buy tickets for the 2009 minor-league season, you are in the front of the line for 2011.

And, yes, the team will still be called the Timbers when it goes big time.

But let's back it up.

As expected, Timbers owner Merritt Paulson was awarded Major League Soccer's 18th team Friday during a rambunctious news conference at the Hilton Portland hotel.

Drew Mahalic, chief executive officer of the Oregon Sports Authority, said MLS brings Portland its second big-league team behind the Trail Blazers, shattering a glass ceiling the city has tried and failed to break many times.

The gathering was dominated by chants and songs from the Timbers Army, the group of fans wearing trademark green that many have credited for creating the buzz that attracted the league to Portland. The fan dedication has given the Rose City the added moniker of Soccer City USA.

"If it wasn't for Soccer City USA, we wouldn't be here," MLS commissioner Don Garber said in making official what was widely reported this week. "How could you have a city named Soccer City and not have an MLS team?"

Portland and Vancouver, B.C., beat out St. Louis and Ottawa, Ontario, for the two expansion spots the league offered up this year. But Garber said that the two losing cities are "a great part of what our future will be" and that 2011 is "just the beginning of a strategic, well-thought-out expansion."

## Fans in Portland cheered for Buckaroos, Mavericks, Breakers and Power

Major League Soccer is coming to Portland in 2011, adding to the leagues and teams that have already made a mark (some deeper than others) in the city's professional sports history.

**Portland Buckaroos (1960-74):** Memorial Coliseum's original tenants, the Buckaroos won three Western Hockey League championships before the league folded.

**Portland Mavericks (1973-77):** Class A Northwest League baseball team, legendary both on and off the field, filled one of the gaps in the Beavers' long run in Portland.

**Portland Timbers (1975-82):** The North American Soccer League team drew big crowds to Civic Stadium (now PGE Park), giving Portland its reputation as Soccer City USA, but the league failed.

**Portland Breakers (1985):** The United States Football League team drew nearly 20,000 per game, but the league folded.

**Portland Power (1996-98):** One of, if not the, model franchise in the women's American Basketball League. The Power actually made money. The ABL didn't, eventually declaring bankruptcy.

**Portland LumberJax (2005- )::** A member of the National Lacrosse League, the LumberJax are averaging crowds of 7,275 this season but are coming off a season-high 8,650 on Feb. 28 against Philadelphia. They've also won five of six.

**Portland Trail Blazers (1970- )::** The NBA team has won one championship and seems capable of galvanizing a state -- in good times and bad.

**Leagues that didn't work:** National Lacrosse Association, Continental Football League, World Football League (twice), World Team Tennis, North American Soccer League (indoor version), Major League Volleyball, U.S. Football Association, Professional Spring Football League, Roller Hockey International, Continental Indoor Soccer League, Arena Football League, Indoor Professional Football League.

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While there is no doubt about the momentum from fans and some city leaders, the revelry could not answer the questions about the city's financial partnership with Paulson.

The most asked question is how the city will fill a \$15 million gap in the funding needed to renovate 20,000-seat PGE Park to meet the league's requirement for a soccer-specific stadium. Paulson and the city also will build a 9,000-seat stadium for the Triple A Portland Beavers baseball team, which Paulson owns. That project is envisioned for the Rose Quarter.

The cost of both projects is estimated at \$88.8 million, \$33.7 million for PGE Park renovations and \$55.1 million for the baseball park. The arrangement calls for a combination of public and private money, with Paulson guaranteeing repayment of city-backed bonds for more than a third of the costs.

The City Council's 3-2 vote last week advanced a nonbinding agreement between Paulson and the city that will finance the construction projects. The parties have until Aug. 1 to craft a detailed contract that will specify the funding sources, construction schedules and the responsibilities and liabilities of each partner.

### Leonard confident

City Commissioner Randy Leonard, one of the chief negotiators of the deal with Paulson, said he is confident that the financial pieces will fall into place. He said the fan response has been infectious, and he has assured the three council members who approved the deal that they did the right thing. Asked what would happen if the financing deal fell through, Leonard said: "It's not going to happen. I don't want to back out."

Garber said he was confident that Paulson and the city would close the gap but was more blunt about the future without a solid financial arrangement: "Then we won't be able to have an MLS team in Portland," he said.

Paulson declined to comment on the specifics of the financing gap except to acknowledge that there is a lot of hard work ahead.

"That's the least of our issues," he said. "We have made a significant investment in Portland today, and I feel great about that."

When asked what would happen if the financing deal fell through, Paulson said: "Hopefully that's a bridge we won't have to cross."

Garber revealed that Paulson paid \$35 million in cash and \$5 million in unspecified "other elements" for the franchise, not the \$40 million in cash as has been widely reported. Garber said the state of the economy caused MLS team owners to rethink the cost of the two expansion teams. Vancouver, B.C., was awarded the other expansion team Wednesday, and its owner also paid \$35 million, Garber said. Existing team owners share the profits of expansion.

Paulson would not comment on whether he would agree to put the \$5 million toward the funding gap. Mayor Sam Adams said the issue would be on the negotiating table as the parties work toward a binding agreement.

The tough economy and projected budget cuts have meant much public outcry about the city's financial backing of soccer. Commissioners Nick Fish and Amanda Fritz voted against the deal, saying they thought the city should be funding basic services rather than soccer.

#### **Economic benefits touted**

But all along, Adams and Leonard saw the deal as a way to stoke the city's economy. Paulson has said the two construction projects will provide work for 600 people and another 300 people will work at the stadiums. Critics claim many of those would be low-paying, temporary jobs.

"This is a smart investment in Portland's future at a time when we need it more than ever," Adams said. "This puts Portland on the international map."

• [Read more about the Portland Timbers becoming an MLS team.](#)

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