

Paulson: No baseball deal, no MLS in Portland

By [Brad Schmidt, The Oregonian](#)

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The Oregonian Merritt Paulson

BEAVERTON -- Sports team owner Merritt Paulson told Beaverton officials that the future of Major League Soccer in Portland hinges entirely on whether he can find a new home for his minor league baseball team, the Portland Beavers.

But that was news to Portland leaders on Wednesday, prompting Paulson to "amend" the statements he made just the night before to the Beaverton City Council.

Beaverton leaders are considering a \$59 million baseball package to build a new stadium. At Tuesday night's meeting, Beaverton City Councilor Cathy Stanton questioned whether Paulson has secured an agreement to buy and operate the pro soccer franchise beginning in 2011, requiring a \$31 million renovation to Portland's PGE Park.

"Yes," Paulson responded. "But it's conditional on finalizing the deal with Portland. And if I don't get a baseball deal done, I'm not going to finalize the deal with Portland. So MLS will not come to Portland unless I do a deal for a new baseball park."

On Wednesday, Paulson said he is confident that deals for baseball and soccer can be reached.

"At some point between now and finalizing the MLS deal, it's my expectation we're going to work out the baseball part," Paulson said Wednesday.

And if that doesn't happen?

"We will cross the bridge when we come to it," he said.

Up until June 24, Paulson had been trying to negotiate a joint deal in Portland to renovate PGE Park into a soccer-specific facility and build a Triple-A baseball stadium at either Memorial Coliseum or Lents Park. Community opposition to baseball proposals forced the Portland City Council to split the projects, prompting Paulson to begin discussions with Beaverton.

Paulson is now working on complicated deals in two cities involving two sports teams, with each negotiation focused on opening the 2011 season with stadiums for the franchises.

Paulson said he has consistently maintained his need to find a new home for the Portland Beavers as part of his effort to buy a pro soccer franchise. He pointed to an Oct. 9 story in the Portland Business Journal, where he linked the two projects together and said he would not sell his baseball team.

Paulson said Wednesday that his team is worth \$20 million, that he does not want to move it to another market and that he has an obligation as team owner to find a place for it to play.

"If it looks like baseball is on tenuous ground, I can't start construction at PGE Park," he said.

Dan Courtemanche, a senior vice president for Major League Soccer, said in a statement that the league is moving forward with its plans to have an expansion team in Portland at PGE Park for the 2011 season.

"We speak regularly with Merritt Paulson and his staff about their plans for soccer," he said. "We look forward to the debut of the MLS club in 2011."

Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard, who has been one of the city's primary negotiators on the deal to remake PGE Park, said he wanted to know more before reacting publicly.

"Is he negotiating and positioning or is it sincere?" he said. "I've seen him do both in our negotiations, which is fine. I just don't know which it is."

Portland Mayor Sam Adams said he received a call Wednesday from Paulson, who wanted to clarify his statements.

"I appreciate the fact that he reiterated his commitment to bring Major League Soccer to Portland and his determination to find a new home for the Beavers, if not in Beaverton then somewhere else," Adams said.

Paulson has been seriously negotiating with Beaverton but also has had conversations with Clackamas County about a stadium site along Interstate 205, near Southeast Otty Road.

In Beaverton, Paulson would pay \$9 million upfront and make annual rent and ticket-tax payments for 25 years, beginning at more than \$870,000. The city would sell revenue bonds to cover \$50 million, to be repaid through higher property and utility taxes.

Taxpayers would be on the hook for about 60 percent of total project costs, and a loosely formed opposition group has vowed to force a citizens' vote.

The Beaverton City Council has yet to vote on a non-binding preliminary agreement, which does not include a specific stadium site. City negotiators hope to strike a deal with a willing landowner in the next two weeks.

With political support, a final development deal could be in place by Dec. 15.

Beaverton City Council President Bruce Dalrymple said Wednesday he is concentrating on baseball and is not focused on soccer in Portland. Dalrymple said he does not feel any extra pressure.

"We've heard some people say we're rushing too fast," he said. "In reality, we're working to the schedule that's been handed to us."

Mark Larabee of The Oregonian staff contributed to this report.

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