



## Soccer task force says: Play ball! (as long as city is protected)

By **Margaret Haberman, The Oregonian**

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Portland's Major League Soccer Task Force today backed a proposal to use city money to renovate PGE Park for the Portland Timbers and build a new baseball stadium for the Portland Beavers.

The group voted to forward a 13-page recommendation to the City Council backing the idea, but outlining a detailed list of concerns and conditions that members hope the council will consider.

Merritt Paulson, who owns the Timbers and Beavers, is bidding on one of two expansion teams up for sale this year by Major League Soccer. Price tag: \$40 million of his own money. He wants the city to borrow another \$85 million to upgrade PGE Park for soccer, as required by the league, and build a new home for the Beavers.

Paulson has been negotiating for weeks with Mayor Sam Adams and Commissioner Randy Leonard, who have said they support the idea if the city's general fund is protected. The general fund, which pays for basic services such as police and fire protection, usually is the back-stop for any city loans.

The task force recommendation leans heavily on caution. Among other things, it says:

- There should be no risk to basic services.
- The city should get a guarantee that if the team or the league fails, Paulson's company, Shortstop LLC, will be responsible for paying off the loans.
- A funding gap, identified at \$20 million to \$40 million, should be paid with private money, not the public's.
- The city should be protected from construction cost overruns.
- Portland should not lose the baseball team to get the MLS franchise.
- Public park space should not be diminished.

The task force didn't recommend a specific site for the project. Lents Park in Southeast Portland and the Memorial Coliseum in the Rose Quarter are top contenders for a new baseball park. Each has its own issues and costs, and Paulson has said either site could work.

The City Council is set to vote next week on a preliminary deal. Site specific details would have to be worked out over time. Paulson must make a formal bid to MLS by March 19. The new team would begin playing in 2011.

Paulson said he's optimistic that he can reach a deal with the city that addresses the concerns laid out by the task force.

"I'm doing more than I envisioned," he said, referring to the "personal guarantees" and "private capital" he's been asked to contribute.

"At some point it doesn't make sense," he said. "But we're doing everything we can to make it happen."

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