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Panel urges city to bring in Major League Soccer

Advisory committee tags recommendations with conditions to protect taxpayers

BY JIM REDDEN

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Portland's City Council should back a bid to bring professional soccer to town, according to a unanimous vote Monday afternoon by a citizen advisory committee.

The group placed numerous conditions on its recommendation, including protecting Portland taxpayers from financial liability and guaranteeing that no city agency budgets are cut to finance the proposal.

But Merritt Paulson, the businessman who has pledged \$40 million of his own money to acquire a Major League Soccer expansion franchise, called the vote a positive step.

"I'm feeling optimistic," said Paulson, who owns the Triple-A Portland Beavers baseball team and United Soccer League First Division Portland Timbers. "I'm feeling we can get the City Council to work with us."

The committee — formally known as the Major League Soccer/Triple-A Baseball Task Force — will present its recommendation to the council on March 11.

According to Mayor Sam Adams, the council must approve a funding framework plan to bring an MLS team to Portland soon after that to support Paulson bid for it.

Many questions remain about the proposal, including the size and sources of the city's financial contribution. A report prepared by the task force said city, regional and state governments might have to spend nearly \$90 million to renovate PGE Park for the MLS team and build a new stadium for the Beavers.

The report said that the current funding plan is between \$18 million and \$37 million short of the potential costs, depending on where the stadium is built.

Paulson said private funds could be raised to close some of that gap, but cautioned they might not be enough.

"We will look at raising private capital, but tax-free bonds or other public funds might still be needed," he said.

The task force also agreed that if any park open space is used for the new stadium, an equal replacement amount in the same part of town must be developed.

Some members thought this might hinder plans to build the stadium in Lents Park in Southeast Portland, an idea favored by City Commissioner Randy Leonard.

The body governing Major League Soccer will award two expansion team franchises this summer.

jimredde@portlandtribune.com