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Portland to join Major League Soccer in 2011

By William McCall

The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — The Portland Timbers plan to step up to Major League Soccer in two years, setting up a Pacific Northwest rivalry with Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia, also recent additions to the league.

Portland was awarded the 18th MLS franchise on Friday at a news conference with owner Merritt Paulson, MLS Commissioner Don Garber and Mayor Sam Adams.

"Portland has the most passionate soccer fans in the country, as we can see today," Paulson told a chanting, cheering crowd of fans decked out in the Timbers' bright green.

The Timbers will keep the name of Paulson's United Soccer Leagues franchise, as well as the vivid green colors and their home, PGE Park, which will be remodeled to meet the soccer league's specifications.

The remodeling was a critical part of the deal. It means the Triple-A Beavers baseball team, which Paulson also owns, will need new quarters. The city has approved an \$89 million construction package that's expected to result in a new ballpark at the Rose Quarter, home of the NBA Trail Blazers.

The city still must come up with a plan to raise the last \$15 million needed for the project, but officials said they were confident they could find it.

Paulson, 36, is the son of former Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, once a Goldman Sachs executive who helped craft taxpayer bailouts of financial giants at the end of the Bush administration.

On Friday, the younger Paulson promised Portland the new soccer franchise would provide economic stimulus of its own -- without risk to the city's taxpayers.

He said the combined soccer and baseball stadium plans will create about 600 construction jobs while team operations will add about 300 permanent jobs to the area.

A list of benefits from the expansion provided by MLS officials estimated the economic impact on the region to be nearly \$50 million a year.

"This is a smart investment in Portland's future at a time that we need it, now more than ever," Adams said to applause and cheers.

Adams also threw out a friendly challenge to the mayors of Seattle and Vancouver, the 15th and 17th additions to the league, respectively, predicting that Portland would beat them both in 2011 or he would have to wear the opponent's jersey in shame.

"Watch out, it's time for a little smack," Adams said, drawing boos and whistles just by mentioning the Seattle Sounders and the new Vancouver Whitecaps, awarded a franchise this week just before Portland.

Adams praised Paulson and the soccer league as "a class act" and thanked them for "believing in Portland."

"This puts Portland on the international map," Adams said.

Merritt Paulson moved to Portland shortly after he bought the Timbers and the Beavers in 2007. He is a former Dartmouth classmate of the current Treasury secretary, Tim Geithner. His wife, Heather, is a Harvard Law School graduate who now works for Nike.

Paulson thanked Adams and City Commissioner Randy Leonard for their roles in winning MLS approval.

Leonard took the podium to lead fans in a chorus of one of their favorite chants before he gave credit to Adams for leading the effort.

"If Sam Adams had not been mayor, we would not be here today," Leonard said.

City Hall has been the stage for political drama since Adams took office in January and then announced he had covered up a sexual relationship with a young male intern during his campaign, causing a public outcry and a temporary rift with some commissioners, including Leonard, an ally in his election campaign.

Leonard also praised fellow Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who was home sick. Saltzman provided the third vote among the five city commissioners to approve the deal.

Garber said the two other cities in contention for a franchise in 2011 -- St. Louis and Ottawa -- would be considered for 2012.

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