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City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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Ballot Measure 26-10: Portland Parks Bond

Your Committee Found:

These general obligation bonds would provide much needed funds for (1) repair and improvement of 99 neighborhood parks, and (2) creation of several new major community centers and other sports and recreational facilities, including aquatic centers and sports fields. No organized opposition surfaced to this well-constructed and cost-effective parks improvements plan. Your committee unanimously and strongly recommends a YES vote.



The City Club membership will vote on this report on Friday, October 21, 1994. Until the membership vote, the City Club of Portland does not have an official position on this report. The outcome of this vote will be reported in the City Club Bulletin dated October 28, 1994 (Vol. 76, No. 22).

I. INTRODUCTION

Measure 26-10 will appear on the ballot as follows:

- Caption:** General Obligation Bonds for Parks Repairs and Improvements
- Question:** Shall Portland repair and improve 99 neighborhood parks by issuing \$58,800,000 in general obligation bonds? If the bonds are approved, they will be repaid from taxes on property or property ownership that are not subject to the limits of section 11b, Article XI of the Oregon Constitution.
- Summary:** This measure would allow the City to issue bonds and use the money for 114 projects at 99 park sites. These projects would make public safety improvements; the City would fix worn out pools, paths, lights, rest rooms, play areas, sports fields and fences. Old watering and heating systems would be replaced. The proposal will make these basic repairs, renovate the city's existing community centers, and do other capital construction and improvements.

These projects include improving parks Multnomah County recently gave the City. The funds would provide new soccer fields in Northeast Portland and in Southwest Portland. The City would also add a senior center and new community centers in East Portland and in Southwest Portland. All of the money will be spent for repairs and improvements, not for day-to-day park operations. The purpose of these projects is to expand the city's recreation choices for adults and for youth.

The estimated total amount to be collected annually is \$5,874,000 in each of the 20 years of the life of the bonds. The estimated tax impact of this measure will be 22 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. These are ESTIMATES ONLY, based on the best information from the County Assessor and from bond market sources at the time of the estimates. The levy is outside the limitation provided in sections 11 and 11b, Article XI of the Oregon Constitution. The measure would not reduce property tax collections by other units of government.

(The language of the caption, question, and summary was provided by the Office of the City Auditor, City of Portland.)

Guided by the 1992 Park Futures process, a master plan for Portland Parks and Recreation Bureau (PPR) which included public meetings, a telephone survey and focus groups, the Portland City Council directed PPR to document priority short-term capital needs for existing parks and their facilities. The PPR staff identified more than \$100 million of needed repairs and improvements.

With the benefit of a community survey privately commissioned for PPR, Commissioner Charlie Hales and the City Council determined that a majority of Portland voters would support a bond measure of up to \$60 million to repair and upgrade PPR facilities — without specific projects being listed.

To bring the \$100 million list down to the acceptable \$60 million level, PPR further prioritized projects on the basis of (1) resource preservation; (2) public benefit (including health and safety); (3) perceived public demand; and (4) geographic equity.

Of the final list of 114 projects seeking bond funds, most are smaller projects, such as watering systems, pathways, lighting, small renovations, vandal-resistant bathrooms, fixing leaking pools, and shoring up play structures.

However, the measure would also allow for a small number of “mega” projects accounting for more than 40 percent of the funds. The largest projects include:

- Mt. Scott Community Center. A renovation project including conversion of the outdoor pool into an indoor family aquatics center. Cost: \$5 million.
- East Metro Community Center. A new facility in a location not yet selected, probably east of I-205. The center would house a gym, fitness center, senior center, meeting rooms, and possible future addition of an outdoor or indoor aquatics facility. Cost: \$5 million.
- Southwest Community Center. Another new facility similar to the East Metro project, but with an indoor aquatics center. No location is chosen, but possibly near I-5 in conjunction with a school. Cost: \$9.5 million.
- East Delta Sports Fields. Would transform East Delta Park into a super center of local, regional and national competitions for softball, soccer and baseball. The center envisions five lighted softball fields, 8-9 soccer fields, parking, picnic and play areas, seating and concessions. Cost: \$2.3 million.

II. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The story of Portland Parks is well documented in the long-term study, *Portland Metropolitan Area Parks*, recently approved by the City Club. Parks in Portland were sparse and undeveloped during the first years of the city’s history. The Portland Park Association, founded in 1898, made contact with and commissioned a study by the renowned Olmstead firm in 1903. In the flush of civic pride following the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, numerous parks were acquired with a \$1 million bond levy in 1907. The plan, however, was only half implemented — although the parts which were implemented (Laurelhurst, Terwilliger Parkway, Sellwood, and Forest Park) were spectacular. Land acquisition levies failed in 1912 and 1913, but passed in 1917. Virtually no parks were added for two decades. In 1938, a small (.004/\$1,000) levy passed to purchase park sites.

For the next 30 years, few parks were added to the system and existing parks were not given budgets adequate to maintain (never mind upgrade) them. In the

past quarter century, Waterfront Park and Pioneer Courthouse Square were added, but the primary story has been one of serious neglect. (Parks are not wilderness areas to be protected and set aside. If they are not actively maintained, heavy usage soon makes them look diseased. For example, most pools operated by PPR are at least 30 years old. All of them leak, and most could be closed because of health hazards caused by maintenance problems.)

In 1989, voters approved a \$7.3 million bond to upgrade PPR facilities. Funds, which are now exhausted, were used primarily to enhance safety through improved lighting, pathways and fencing.

Confusing the issue of the PPR bond is the question of regional green space acquisition. A bond measure (26-1) to purchase unspecified lands was forwarded by Metro in 1992 — and was recommended by the City Club. It failed miserably at the polls, but Metro is again interested in putting a new green spaces bond measure before the voters, this time one that would identify specific properties to acquire. However, the backers of the Measure 26-10 convinced the green spaces advocates to wait until the fall election in 1995. No funds in 26-10 would be used to acquire green spaces.

III. ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR

The measure would:

- Enhance the safety of park users by improving lighting, sidewalks and trails, and by attracting increased usage of the parks to provide a safer atmosphere for users.
- Increase geographic equity of PPR facilities by improving sites throughout the city. Programs and facilities would be enhanced in parks which are currently underserved, particularly in Northeast, Southwest and recently annexed areas of East County.
- Provide increased recreational opportunities for youth which will help direct them into healthy and safe activities and away from street, gang, and other potentially self-destructive activities.
- Repair existing facilities before they become irreparable and/or dangerous. Some facilities carry an increased risk of liability because of disrepair. Some pools are leaking, do not circulate water correctly, or are otherwise unhealthy and unsafe.
- Help meet the huge demand for playing fields and gyms throughout the city. The city is growing, and many neighborhood parks are over scheduled during summer months causing adverse impacts on neighborhoods. Schools reducing their sports and recreation programs put even more pressure on PPR programs.
- Provide a favorable economic impact on the city by increasing its appeal to individuals and businesses considering relocation. The sports facilities

could draw major softball, baseball and soccer tournaments to the area — which would boost the economy.

- Bring multigenerational groups together under one roof at proposed new community centers. Allowing places for people to gather for activities and events is the catalyst for neighborhoods and communities to synthesize.
- Cost the average homeowner only the price of a modest restaurant meal for two. PPR has a history of cost-effective project management which is sensitive to the needs of the city, as evidenced in the 1989 bond measure projects.
- Be well-timed to leverage more dollars in a bond measure because of low interest rates. Waiting will only increase the cost.
- Reduce PPR operational expenses through automatic watering systems, maintenance-free pathways, and providing preventive maintenance to avoid costly repairs to facilities and equipment in the future.
- Stimulate the local economy with new construction and recreation jobs.

IV. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

- The PPR Bureau should have a clearer vision of the future for the parks system before asking for funds. There is not clear evidence of citizen involvement in the design and running of PPR. Relationships should be better worked out with Portland schools to increase coordination of facilities and resources. A citizen advisory board should be set up to meet with PPR officials.
- The proposed projects will result in additional annual operating expenses by PPR of some \$500,000 with no guaranteed source of funding.
- The projects will strain the ability of PPR to effectively manage such a large number of projects — especially the four “mega” projects proposed.
- The projects are not needed. The PPR system works well enough as is and can be effectively maintained at an acceptable level without additional resources.
- New recreational facilities would compete with private athletic clubs which already meet recreational needs of Portland residents.
- There is no demonstrated benefit from recreational programs. If people want to exercise or get out in nature, they should pay for it themselves or through their “friends of parks” organizations. The measure will only drain resources away from where they are needed more, such as public safety and schools.
- The City Council should provide funds to maintain PPR facilities from the general fund, in competition with all other City services. The City

should live within Ballot Measure #5 limitations and not try to fund one of its fundamental services from bond funds. The City might also find other sources of funding for PPR, such as selling some of the properties donated or willed to it which are idle and not planned for development.

- Additional PPR services should be privatized and allowed to survive or not on their own merits. User fees, concessions and rentals would pay for their upkeep.
- Proposed projects are not geographically equal. More projects are needed in North, Northeast and Southeast where most people live.

V. DISCUSSION

Parks Vision

Of primary concern to the committee was the question of whether or not the measure was consistent with the vision of PPR outlined in the long-range City Club report. That report envisioned an enhanced partnership between PPR and schools and the creation or development of new neighborhood parks near every elementary and middle school, larger community parks near each high school, and multi-generational community centers at each middle school. The report also strongly criticized the City for deferring maintenance on so many parks. It also called for protected riparian zones, a public plaza in each town or city, pedestrian and bicycle paths between parks, a “blockbuster” sports complex for softball and soccer, and changes in the governance of PPR that would include more citizen involvement as well as a regional parks coordinating council.

The measure is a construction project which has nothing to do with acquiring new park properties (with the exception of new land for two community centers) or changing the governance of PPR, including the relationship with Portland Public Schools. However, the elements of the measure which speak to the Club’s long-range report include the development of the “blockbuster” sports complex at Delta Park and two new community centers which theoretically could be associated with a school. Measure 26-10 would also go a long way toward fixing the parks infrastructure problems caused by inadequate maintenance, which were thoroughly documented in the long-term study. No evidence was provided by witnesses that suggested Measure 26-10 was inconsistent with the goals and recommendations of the Club’s study.

Value and Affordability

The measure should be supported only if it would fund projects that are needed. Projects should be a sound and reasonable investment of tax dollars, and should be guaranteed to have ongoing operational funding.

Your committee was impressed by how well the measure balances allocation of funds between repairs/maintenance and the creation/upgrading of major

facilities. The measure places great emphasis on improving safety at the parks through increased lighting, improved pathways, and enhanced attractiveness to families and seniors. The committee heard evidence that many parks, particularly in North and parts of inner Northeast, are not considered safe by families and seniors because they are monopolized by gangs and rowdy youth. Making Parks more attractive and safe will increase their popularity with lawful users.

Your committee was hard pressed to find any public opposition to the measure. Although private athletic clubs have an economic self-interest in opposing the measure, they have been virtually silent about Measure 26-10. Athletic clubs could make the argument that their existence makes construction of new recreational facilities unnecessary. The committee believes, however, that most private athletic clubs cater to very different audiences. Users tend to be adults looking for aerobic/fitness workouts and weight training. The larger private athletic clubs, catering to families with a broad range of recreational programs, are too expensive for most residents. PPR aquatics facilities charge fees that are affordable by virtually anyone.

A great deal of evidence forwarded showed that Portland parks have been victims of neglect. Funds that should have been going to repair playground equipment, vandal-proofing rest rooms, overhauling swimming pools, etc., have not been available to PPR. Perhaps the City Council is derelict in not voting more dollars for PPR instead of other basic municipal services. But politics being what they are, police, fire, water, sewers, etc. are always going to get priority over parks. But, without funds now, advocates said, pools will be in danger of shutting down for health reasons, and structures will have to be torn down.

The bond is not a small one — \$58.8 million. However, \$25 per year for the average Portland homeowner appears to be acceptable to a majority of voters according to the PPR poll. The committee was impressed that the timing is good, because rates are now low so that more construction dollars can be leveraged. Although, according to PPR figures, the net increased operational costs would be some \$500,000 per year, the committee is satisfied that the current City Council is strongly committed to providing operational funds should the measure be passed and that funds would be available based on tax revenue forecasts.

Certainly, PPR could stretch tax dollars by collaborating more closely with schools to share facilities and programs. PPR could also sell undeveloped properties it owns to raise additional funds. However, without an audited inventory or a plan for those properties, the value of such a move is unknown. An advantage of the PPR measure is that many of the projects, such as automatic watering systems and the enhancement of the Delta Park sports complex, actually will save operational expenses or provide new sources of income. As to the “privatization” of Parks to save tax dollars, little if any evidence shows such a move would benefit taxpayers. Parks, your committee heard time and again, are public places where citizens congregate for socializing, recreation and reflection. Many PPR programs and facilities already charge fees

(swim and tennis centers, for example), but parks are not amusement centers. To meet their mission, most of what they offer must be free and open to all.

Geographic Equity

The major facility construction projects were chosen with the idea of providing PPR services to areas of the city that are underserved, particularly in North Portland, newly incorporated East County areas, and Southwest Portland. Although Southwest, the most affluent area of Portland, seems less in need of a new major facility with an aquatics center, the only public swim center in the area is at Wilson High School, which is uncovered and open only in the summer.

The 99 proposed renovation projects are thoroughly and evenly distributed throughout the city. In fact, the vast majority of Portland parks would see some benefits from the measure. Your committee heard ample testimony from PPR officials that the prioritizing of projects was based on a sound process — namely the Parks Futures plan. Clearly, politics were at work in seeing that there was geographic equity in the process, and that previously underserved areas would not have cause to howl for being left out.

Opportunities for Meeting Unmet Needs

Some witnesses speculated that because PPR plays an important role in providing recreational services for at-risk youth, investing in Parks is an investment in the future of the city. The Police Activities League, for example, relies heavily on PPR facilities. While this is not easily measured, it's hard to justify seeing PPR services reduced when youth need guidance and services.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The livability of a city is measured many ways, not the least of which is the quality, abundance and distribution of public parks. Portland has an excellent parks system, but has several flaws, i.e., the shameful neglect of some parks and the lack of major recreational facilities in North, Southwest, and East County. The measure would go a long way toward reversing these problems.

Portland's existing parks are underutilized. Making parks safer with more lighting and better pathways will help draw a critical mass of family and senior users.

Certain PPR facilities, particularly softball, baseball and soccer fields, are extremely over utilized. This is not only an inconvenience for users, it is a problem for nearby residents of neighborhood parks because of play late into the evenings. Development of the super complex at Delta Park as envisioned under the measure will allow more local and tournament play, as well as less late night play at neighborhood parks.

The PPR Bureau is capable of completing major projects on time and within budget. They have a positive track record for building user-friendly parks and recreational facilities.

Enhancing parks can only have a beneficial impact on youth. Supervised programming can provide positive outlets for youth, reduce crime, and enhance use of park facilities by families and seniors.

A bond of \$58.8 million is a reasonable and affordable cost for citizens to bear to maintain and enhance the quality of city parks.

VII. RECOMMENDATION

Your committee recommends a "Yes" vote on Ballot Measure 26-10.

Respectfully submitted,

Harvey Black
William Connor
Michael Dolan
Rosemary Fisk
Marilyn Richen
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VIII. APPENDIX

Witnesses

John Sewell, Chief Planner, Bureau of Parks and Recreation
Mary Anne Cassin, Parks Designer, Parks and Recreation
Charlie Hales, Portland City Commissioner in charge of PPR
Irma Campbell Cook, Northwest Athletic Clubs Asso.
Donald Shaw, Vice President, Police Activities League
Don McClave, Portland Chamber of Commerce
John Gould, Chair, City Club Parks Study

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