

Laborers Local 483 to City: 'Stop the cuts'

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

It long ago occurred to Richard "Buz" Beetle that saving his union's members from layoff was a matter of public interest. Beetle is business manager of Laborers Local 483, which represents 849 public employees — including several hundred road and park maintenance workers at the City of Portland. And this year, up to 60 members in Portland's parks and transportation bureaus are facing the possibility of layoff.

What does it mean for the City of Portland to halt maintenance on a 5,000-mile road system that would cost \$9 billion to replace? What will it be like when restrooms are closed and trash cans removed in 10,975 acres of city parks? Beetle and his union don't want to find out, and are waging a public campaign to stop the cuts.

Portland Parks and Recreation has been through four consecutive years of budget cuts, Beetle told City Council at an April 12 budget hearing — but this year's cuts are by far the worst.

Mayor Sam Adams asked the bureau for three budget scenarios — with cuts of 4, 6, and 8 percent. The biggest cuts are in daily park maintenance. To save just under \$1 million, between 15 and 37 regular positions would be elim-

inated. It means most park restrooms would be closed. Some parks would have no garbage cans; others would have less frequent garbage pickup. In the 6 percent scenario, the Fulton and Hillside community centers would close. In the 8 percent scenario, irrigation would be cut, maintenance reduced at Hoyt Arboretum, and the Dutch Elm Disease program, which inoculates street trees and removes diseased trees, would be eliminated.

"The other years we cut all along the periphery of our core functions," Beetle told City Council. "These cuts are different. For the first time we are cutting into our core functions."

And the cuts, Beetle says, come on top of a \$500 million deferred maintenance backlog: Parks already have broken bathrooms and drinking fountains, and maintenance employees write work orders they can't fill.

Meanwhile, the City of Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) faces a \$15 million cut — 14 percent — in maintenance and paving. That spells the elimination of 60 positions, half of which would be layoffs, and half vacant positions that will go unfilled. And PBOT's operating budget has already fallen \$16 million over the last decade.

What the new cuts mean, in concrete terms:

- Contract-paving will be suspended for five years.

- Street cleaning will be reduced from nine to four times per year on the city's busiest streets, and on residential streets to just once per year.

- Painting of pavement markings will be cut by a third.

In a January letter to City Council, Local 483 argued that cutting street maintenance is a terrible idea — because every dollar you don't spend on preventive maintenance today will be a 10 dollar reconstruction cost tomorrow.

Cutting street cleaning will also cost more in the long run, Beetle says: "It's not just that the arterials themselves are going to be dirty. The problem is that debris left in the street gets washed into the sewer system, and from the sewers it goes into the pump station, where it causes havoc."

City bureaus have budget advisory committees made up of appointed citizen volunteers, and this year, the committees were told not to consider new revenues. But PBOT's committee, in its report, was blunt about the result of that: "Current resource allocations are totally inadequate to meet Bureau needs, and are unsustainable in the long run unless additional revenue streams (e.g., street maintenance fees) are created."

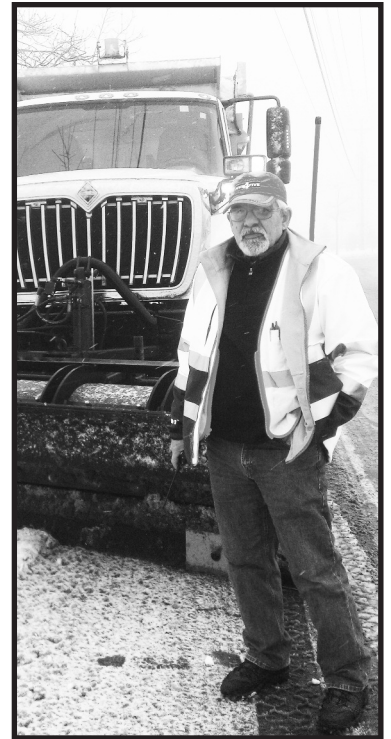
The gas tax, the committee said, is

becoming increasingly unsustainable as a primary support for road maintenance. Fuel efficiency has been going up, and total vehicle registration has been going down.

Other cities have made up for that by assessing a street maintenance fee on property owners. And in 2008, then-commissioner Adams put together a "Safe, Sound and Green Streets" proposal, in which a \$4.54 street maintenance fee would enable to City of Portland to tackle the street repair backlog. A poll showed majority support for it. But Adams backed off when Paul Romain, lobbyist for the Oregon Petroleum Association, threatened a ballot campaign to oppose the fee.

Long-term, Portland may have little alternative but to consider a street maintenance fee. But Local 483 felt an immediate fix was needed too. To scour the City budget for alternatives, the union hired economist Peter Donahue.

He pored through a decade of the City's audited comprehensive annual financial reports, and found a stash of money — a \$120.6 million balance in the City's "internal service fund." The way the fund works, city bureaus are charged for a range of administrative services that are centrally provided, such as facilities, fleet, printing, IT support, employee health insurance, liabil-



Hadi Sharifi works as an automotive equipment operator in the street cleaning department at the City of Portland. The department, which is facing a 22 percent budget cut, dispatches crews as first responders during snow and ice events.

ity, workers' comp, and legal. Donahue found that over time, agencies were charged more than those services cost to provide, with the result that the fund

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