

Commissioner Fish goes to Washington; trip includes Sears Armory housing project

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Newly elected City Commissioner Nick Fish spent three days in Washington D.C. last month, and came away with significant progress on three local issues, at least one affecting southwest Portland directly.

As the commissioner in charge of housing issues, Fish attended a national convention on homelessness. He also took the time to meet with Col. Jim Balocki of the Department of Defense's Base Re-alignment and Closure Division on the disposition of the Sears Armory.

The army has designated the 3.7 acre site at 2730 S.W. Multnomah Blvd. as surplus, and the Portland City Council has endorsed a plan by Community Partners for Affordable Housing to develop the site for 100 or more units of affordable housing.

According to Fish, Balocki was very impressed with the city's plans for the property. Balocki sent an e-mail complementing Portland on its draft proposal, and Fish told *The Post* that he was "pretty optimistic" that the transfer will occur.

A potential hang-up, he said, was approval of the project by the federal bureau of Housing and Urban Development, necessary because the project involves low-income housing. In theory reviews of this sort are supposed to be

completed within 60 days, Fish said, but because HUD is "a little backed up" in its work the process could take up to a year.

For this reason Fish also paid a visit to Congressman Barney Frank of Massachusetts, chair of the House committee that oversees HUD, and he promised to try to facilitate the process. Fish worked for Frank immediately after he graduated from law school.

Fish renewed a promise he made to the Multnomah Neighborhood Association to form an advisory committee that would provide input on the project, including its design. The committee would, among other things, visit "comparable" projects in other parts of town and incorporate design features they liked. "We have a chance to do this right," he said.

Fish also visited members of the Oregon congressional delegation in pursuit of his third project. Portland has 11 housing projects containing a total of 700 units with contracts that are due to expire in 2013. Currently the owners maintain affordable rents in return for federal subsidies.

With the expiration of the contracts the buildings could be sold, converted to condominiums or have their rents raised to market rates, and up to 800 poor people could face eviction into a market that can't accommodate those already seeking housing.

However, as part of their contracts, the projects' owners have been paying

into an "excess receipts" fund that has grown to \$7 to \$9 million. Fish says he is asking the Oregon delegation, and Frank, for a "discreet change in the law" that would allow these funds to be used to help transferred to a suitable non-profit agency that would keep them permanently affordable.

"Preservation is one of our housing strategies," Fish said. "We're building more affordable housing, but we also want to preserve all we can of what we have."



If the U.S. Department of Defense approves, the Sears Armory site will be rebuilt into an affordable housing project. (Post file photo by Don Snedecor)

NEWS BRIEFS

City plans series of bio-swales for Multnomah Village

The city is planning the installation of three bio-swales, with attendant new sidewalks, in Multnomah in the next year, and some merchants are seeking to change the scheduling of one of them.

The first such project, at a cost of \$18,000, would be installed at Southwest 35th Avenue and Troy Street, with work set to commence later this month. A second, in front of the Lucky Lab Pub on Southwest Capitol Highway at 35th Avenue, would be installed in the spring and cost \$27,000.

The most ambitious, called Raindrop Walk, would cost \$115,000, would be on Southwest Capitol Highway between 35th and 36th avenues, and would be installed beginning in the fall of 2009.

This last has made some merchants nervous. They fear that the work, and attendant disruption, could interfere with sales, particularly if the work continued into the holiday season. Leonard Gard, Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. land use specialist, said city officials are reluctant to reschedule the work, since this is one of several projects that must be completed within a budget year, but that they haven't ruled it out.

SWNI hosts debate between City Council candidates

Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. is hosting a public debate between Portland City Council candidates Amanda Fritz and Charles Lewis beginning at 7 p.m. October 20 at Multnomah Arts Center, 7688 S.W. Capitol Highway. Bring your curiosity and questions to help decide who will hold this important political position.

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