

Classes, community gardens, swimming pools could be among park bureau cutbacks

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Hard times are coming, and seniors, gardeners and young basketball players will be among those taking the hit.

This was some of the news representatives of the Portland Bureau of Parks presented to a standing-room-only crowd of more than 400 people last month at a preview of its upcoming budget.

Anticipating a major drop-off in revenues due to the ongoing recession, Mayor Sam Adams has directed all city bureaus to prepare "cut packages" equal to 2.5 and 5 percent of their 2008-09 budgets. Parks representatives gave those present a taste of what that will be like.

Among other things, the draft budget as of January 10 proposed elimination of the bureau's youth basketball program. The budget also called for a 50 percent fee increase, from \$50 per season to \$75, for use of each growing plot in the bureau's Community Garden program, which provides 1,000 plots citywide for would-be gardeners who do not have yards of their own for growing.

As part of this reduction also, although all existing garden plots would be retained and maintained, the bureau would cease outreach efforts to create new plots for the program, which has 1,000 would-be gardeners on a waiting list.

The draft also called for elimination of a staff position that helped collect "excess food" from community gardeners who grow more food than they can use, and deliver it to food banks for delivery to the needy.

Additionally the draft budget would:

- Eliminate one of the 12 SUN School after-school activities programs funded by the Parks Bureau. (Other SUN School programs, similar in nature, are funded from other sources.)
- Reduce the operating season for outdoor swimming pools, including the Wilson High School pool, by two weeks.
- Cut \$130,000 from the "pass through" funds the city contributes to eight local senior centers, including the Neighborhood House Senior Center, through Multnomah County.
- Cut or eliminate funding for classes and other activities at these senior centers, while trying to "absorb" them at the bureau's own community centers such as the Multnomah Center and Southwest Community Center at Gabriel Park. Based on the priorities presented last month, this would not be part of a 2.5 percent cut, but would be used in a five percent cut.

Concerning this last, bureau officials at the meeting and in subsequent conversations concede that it would be difficult to absorb all the Senior Center activities within the existing capacities of community center, and probably impossible to do so while retaining the rates seniors have been paying for these activities.

For instance, one person who testified last month stated that a class currently offered at Neighborhood House costs \$22 per session, while a comparable activity at Multnomah Center costs \$200. Some current users of these services "may be priced out," Terri Davis, the bureau's West Services Coordinator, told *The Post*.

The "pass through" cuts will mean a reduction of \$8,000 in the budget of each senior center, said Lee Girard of Multnomah County's Aging Services

Division. The funds are used for a variety of services, she said.

One proposal to absorb the impact is to cut funds for 2,500 one-way trips to the center for seniors in need of such services. Another proposal is to leave the travel services intact, allowing a "much bigger impact" on other operating services, especially considering the increasing demand we're likely to see" for senior support services in the recession, Girard said.

Southwest Neighborhoods Inc. Trails Committee chair Don Baack attended the budget session and told *The Post*, "I found it very frustrating. There was such a lack of information. There was no context for these decisions. They didn't sit down with us and say, 'Okay, what's important to the community and how can we provide it?' They ask the community to accept them as the divine hand."

To the extent that there has been outreach, "They focus on user groups, not the neighborhoods," which Baack felt

skewed the result. Baack was especially frustrated by the proposed cuts and fee increases for Community Gardens, saying, "Encouraging people to grow their own food is an extremely high priority." The bureau could work with volunteers to get surplus produce to food banks and other helping agencies, he said.

In short, Baack said, "I'm not convinced these are the appropriate cuts." Neither, it seems, do bureau administrators, starting at the top. According to several Parks representatives, commissioner Nick Fish, who oversees Parks, is unhappy with the cuts proposed for senior services, and has asked for a new budget that creates savings in other ways.

According to bureau spokesperson Beth Sorenson, there will be a new set of Portland Parks and Recreation budget meetings in February. For more information or to register your reaction to the proposed cuts, you can contact the bureau at www.portlandparks.org.

Local health clinic

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to move to a larger facility at 7754 SW Capitol Hwy. "This is all grants that we write constantly to keep filling up the pots so we can keep these programs running," Godil said. "We can't survive without donations. Faith organizations are a big part of our fundraising -- Christian, Jewish and Muslim.

Clients pay on a sliding scale based on their pre-tax income and family size. "Patients are very willing to contribute," Godil said. "We've had numerous instances where people did not have money but later mailed us a check."

She remembers one man walking in with a \$20 bill months after his appointment. He told her, "I didn't have money but now I do so I'd like to give a donation. You guys really helped me at my time."

The Southwest Community Health Center, 7688 SW Capitol Hwy (in Room 37 of the Multnomah Arts Center) is open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. and the second and fourth Mondays of the month from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Appointments are required. For more information visit www.swchc-pdx.org or call (503) 977-0733.

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Bus lines: 20

Tuesday, February 24, 6-8:30 PM

Multnomah Arts Center
7688 SW Capitol Highway
Bus lines: 44; 45; 64

For more information visit:

www.portlandonline.com/communitybudget

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