

City doesn't have to play ball to invest in Lents

BY PAULETTE FILZ
GUEST COLUMNIST

More than 150 residents of Lents gathered in their beautiful park on June 3, to have a chance to have their opinions heard. With a mixture of sadness, anger, frustration, even puzzlement, they made it clear that the park is heavily used, and cherished in its present form. Any commercialization intended to draw 6,000 to 8,000 people into a residence-ringed park will cause a serious drop in the quality of life for these families. They already deal with parked cars crowding the small streets for blocks around on summer weekends, but have learned to live with it because they love the park, too. At least those crowds never approach 6,000.

But in their zeal to convince residents that a stadium would be a good thing, developers suggest adding concerts, festivals, and other community events to make use of the large stadium on days when there are no Beavers games. They miss the point. Neighbors are not worried about baseball; they are worried about crowd noise, increased litter, bright lights, congested streets and lowered property values. If you decide to sell your house and move because of these problems, who would buy it?

Though the new light rail and I-205 can carry large numbers of people, they only go north and south. The east-west routes drivers will use are Powell, Holgate, Harold and Foster. Of these, only Foster is consistently four lanes; the others fluctuate between two and four lanes, causing congestion as lanes merge. There is real resistance to coming to an "outer-southeast" area by those who live on the west side, as stated in many comments on sports blogs. This is yet another reason why a new stadium here may not be successful.

Supporters of the MLS/Baseball deal

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insist that a stadium will "revitalize" Lents. However, the research does not bear that out. (Here is a link to a lengthy study of Triple-A baseball and community economics just released: bojack.org/images/stadiumstudy.pdf). Only if a stadium is sited in a downtown area does it signal improved economy. Stadiums built farther out, particularly not at major transportation crossroads, rarely improve the neighborhood. Instead of seeing their home values rise, the Lents neighborhood may see an under-used stadium surrounded by closed restaurants, coffee shops, and other businesses. And the only place to build those new shops is where houses are now. Developers are notorious for forcing out homeowners while paying them pennies on the dollar for their homes. Then Lents would have an even greater need for affordable housing. We have been given a rosy picture of the commercial future of Lents that may not happen. Can Lents afford to gamble with its families on this deal?

But another significant concern is the proposed use of \$42 million in urban renewal funds. Although planners speak in terms of wanting to help Lents, it is becoming apparent that the existence of these funds is what makes Lents so attractive to developers. This targeting of urban renewal funds is exactly why the 30 percent set-aside for affordable housing was created in the first place. It would be sad if the very commissioner who worked so hard to get it designated — Randy Leonard — is the very person instrumental in wanting to disregard the affordable-housing protection now. Locals say that the transfer of such a large amount into one project would nearly eliminate new affordable housing in Lents for three to five years, to build up the fund again. There have been criticisms in the media that Lents is "not using" these funds. But there is steady progress in Lents, in small projects, which are the kind to help a community grow gradually. Using \$42 million on one project, one that has some risk to it, is not the best use for the community. Think of how many housing units and business startups could be nurtured with that money! That is what Lents needs, not a ball stadium.

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Urban renewal funding by Lents, for Lents

BY DAN NEWTH
GUEST COLUMNIST

Moving into a home after years on Portland streets was bitter sweet. I loved my wife, Twila, and her crooked little house that she'd owned and lived in for 20 years, but I felt separation anxiety from the community I had come to know volunteering and selling Street Roots. To overcome the insecurity, I began bonding with my new home. Cooking our meals, growing a garden in the backyard and doing handyman repairs around the house put a smile on Twila's face and helped me feel I was contributing. There was no shortage of house repairs needed, including plumbing, electrical and sagging sheetrock from a leaky roof. The leaky roof turned into a bigger problem than I could deal with. And black mold quickly became a serious health concern, not to mention the dangerous, imminent collapse of the roof and all that would destroy. We needed to completely tear off and replace the 80-year-old roof.

We didn't have money to replace the roof, but because we were below median income and lived in the Lents Urban Renewal Area (URA) we were able to apply to the Portland Development Commission for a loan that we used to repair our roof and the water damage that was destroying our home. Without the URA funded loan, we would have lost our home, and without anyone living in our crooked old mold infested house the neighborhood would have suffered one more blight. There is no question in my mind that Lents Urban Renewal funding has gradually improved the Lents community. I own thanks to the residents of Lents because our property tax dollars subsidized the loan to repair our roof. I

also own a thank-you to all residents of Portland and Multnomah County because they are subsidizing the Lents Urban Renewal funding.

Lents area property taxes have been diverted away from desperately needed county services, like jails, county medical, mental health and Adult and Family Services, leaving others to carry the load or just fall through the cracks.

Understanding the benefits and terrible cost of urban renewal funding, I still support the concept if it is used for its intended purposes of building affordable housing, helping people with incomes below median income become homeowners, helping low-income homeowners maintain their homes and supporting economic growth through small businesses. Too often it has been subverted to build pet projects that make developers richer and deprive the poor and under-represented of the support they have a right to.

If we look at the URA in Northwest Portland or the South Waterfront Project, we would see a number of URA-funded projects that were divergent from the originally intended uses. Most of these projects happened under Mayor Vera Katz' administration with Chief of Staff Sam Adams.

Vera's back at City Hall again, this time as a lobbyist for multi-millionaire sport team owner Merritt Paulson. Paulson, with Vera's help, has come up with a local plan to take our tax dollars and build one new stadium in Lents Park while renovate the PGE Park Stadium. He is even pulling a trick out of Dick Cheney's bag and has awarded himself a no-bid contract for his construction company to do all the work. They tried to sell this pork project as

economic development. The mayor's office commissioned a study to evaluate the economic impact of the sweetheart deal, and the result was Portland would lose more than 100 living-wage jobs. Lately the mayor's office refers to the project as an "amenity."

What really made me mad is the plan to take \$42 million from the Lents urban renewal area funding on Lents Park by building a baseball stadium and parking lot for Paulson's minor league baseball team. The project has the support of Randy Leonard, Mayor Sam Adams and most of the Lents Town Center Urban Renewal Committee.

I don't think the committee represents the majority of Lents residents. Every neighbor I have talked to thinks building a professional baseball stadium in Lents Park using URA funding is wrong. Lents residents have even organized "Friends of Lents Park." June 3rd was the first meeting. About 150 to 200 people attended and opposed the baseball stadium. I was energized by the unity building in my community. We don't want to lose our green park space, we don't want the increased traffic in our residential neighborhood and we don't want our URA funding sunk into a get-richer-quick scheme by some multi-millionaire team owner.

We do have some allies in this political struggle; Commissioner Nick Fish, Commissioner Amanda Fritz, Community Development Network, Portland Parks Advisory Board and other politically aware Portlanders. Please help us by contacting Commissioner Dan Saltzman dsaltzman@ci.portland.or.us, 503-823-4151 or write: c/o City Hall SW Fourth Avenue, Portland, OR 97204



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