

# Inn: Port heard proposals from several different groups

Continued from Page 1A

## Deal gone bad

Hunter's client, Ganesh Sonpatki, had been negotiating with the Port and heavily indebted hotelier Brad Smith since 2014 to take over the Riverwalk Inn and pay off Smith's debts to the city and the Port. In exchange, Sonpatki would get the two years remaining on Smith's lease and an option for a five-year extension.

The Port Commission voted in June to have staff finalize an agreement, but the deal was never finalized. Luke Reese, the Port's attorney, claims Param canceled contract negotiations before they were completed, while Hunter claims the Port wrongfully walked away from a binding agreement.

While the deal with Param

languished, the Port was approached in July by Orr, president of Signature Seafoods in Seattle, and Trabucco, a local developer formerly behind the Hotel Elliott. The two offered a similar deal to Sonpatki's.

The Port eventually heard proposals from several different groups, including local restaurateur and adult home operator Kruparao Kancharla, Comfort Suites Columbia River owner James Mulloy and Bellingham, Washington, hotelier Mark Hollander.

The Port Commission ultimately voted in September to install Orr's and Trabucco's Hospitality Ventures as

the short-term operators while the agency created a request for proposals for a long-term understanding. Within a month, Param filed suit.

The Port put the request for proposals on hold, pending the outcome of the lawsuit.

## Public issue, or private gain?

In January, Hospitality Ventures' lawyer, William Miner, filed a motion to strike Param's claim against Hospitality Ventures and take his clients out of the case. His motion rests on a state law covering the right of petition and free speech on issues of public interest — the public issue being the Port-owned



Ganesh Sonpatki



Daily Astorian/File Photo

The Astoria Riverwalk Inn as seen from the West End Mooring Basin last year.

Riverwalk Inn. The law is known as an anti-SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) statute.

Hunter responded to Miner's motion to strike, saying Orr and Trabucco are

not covered by the statute because they interfered with Param's business relationships for their own private financial gain.

"As courts have repeatedly recognized, conduct

of that nature is not subject to the anti-SLAPP statute," Hunter wrote. "Even if the statute applies, Param has introduced substantial evidence in support of its claim for interference."

# Liquor: Craft beer, winemakers oppose privatization

Continued from Page 1A

Replacing that revenue might be challenging given that the Oregon Legislature needs a three-fifths majority to pass a new tax, said Paul Romain, a lobbyist for the Oregon Beer & Wine Distributors Association, which is a member of the coalition.

The measure also would likely increase the number of liquor outlets in Oregon. There were 248 liquor stores in the state, as of March 24, according to the Oregon Liquor Control Commission.

## Beer, wine opposition

Craft beer and winemakers oppose privatization because liquor would compete with beer and wine for both store shelf space and buyers.

"If there is liquor in the store, the shelf space has to come somewhere," said Paul Romain, a lobbyist for the Oregon Beer & Wine Distributors Association. "In Washington state, a lot of the wineries that had product in stores, their numbers went down

because the shelf space was then used for liquor."

Oregon is one of a diminishing number of states that still regulates pricing, marketing, distribution and retail sales of liquor, according to Oregonians for Competition, a coalition of grocers, retailers, craft distillers, and consumers who support the initiative. Oregon is one of 13 states that still controls retail sales through government-operated stores or designated agents, according to the National Alcohol Beverage Control Association.

"We believe Oregonians are ready to end the state's monopoly on liquor sales and allow Oregon consumers to buy liquor at qualified grocery and retail stores — just like consumers do in most other states," co-sponsor Lynn Gust, retired president of Portland-based Fred Meyer Stores, said in a statement. "The initiative will allow the state to focus more on alcohol law enforcement, which is what Oregon voters originally intended the OLCC to do."



Don Ryan/AP Photo

Joe Bascuti stocks shelves at a liquor store in Portland.



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