



Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

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## MEMO

**DATE:** March 10, 2021

**TO:** Portland Historic Landmarks Commission

**FROM:** Lora Lillard, Cassie Ballew and Brandon Spencer-Hartle,  
Bureau of Planning and Sustainability

**CC:** Peter Meijer Architect and Hillary Adam, Bureau of Development Services

**SUBJECT:** Briefing: Belgian Block cobblestones

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The Portland Historic Landmarks Commission will hold a briefing and work session on Belgian Block cobblestones with the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS), along with Peter Meijer Architect (PMA), on March 22, 2021.

On November 18, 2019, BPS and the Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) briefed the Landmarks Commission on the status of the Belgian Blocks and the Kinsman Foundation grant that was awarded to BPS and PBOT for using the Belgian Blocks at the Earl Blumenauer Bridge. While the purpose of this upcoming briefing is not focused on a specific site, staff acknowledge from this initial discussion with Landmarks Commission and in our discussions with fellow City agencies that there are issues and challenges to the deployment of Belgian Blocks that need to be explored further in anticipation of their use.

BPS has contracted PMA to prepare a technical report on Belgian Blocks that will include the following components: materiality (e.g. nature of the stone and viability for cutting, smoothing or roughing for use in an urban environment); regulatory constraints (e.g. consistency with the Americans with Disability Act and maintenance considerations); and case studies.

As you are aware, deployment of the blocks requires approval from the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission, per deployment criteria developed by the Commission in 1975 that state:



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1. Cobblestones should be reused primarily in districts or areas of the City where they were originally used. Historic Districts and Historic Landmarks where cobblestones were originally used as the paving material should receive first priority.
2. That as a general policy, cobblestones should be used for large paving areas, primarily in public pedestrian spaces where the special character of cobblestone texture would be meaningful. The use of cobblestones as small decorative elements in unrelated or isolated projects should be discouraged, as these uses are usually insignificant or inappropriate.

As these were written before the passage of the American Disabilities Act in 1990, the second criterion in particular has proven challenging in meeting PBOT's requirements for accessibility in public rights-of-way deployment. To kick off the work by PMA, Peter Meijer's team, along with BPS and Bureau of Development Services staff, will meet with PBOT staff to hear some of the issues and opportunities for deploying Belgian Blocks to date.

At the March 22 briefing and work session, BPS will share the status of the Belgian Blocks to date, as well as a summary of what we have heard in our discussions with PBOT. We also want to facilitate an initial round-robin discussion with the Commission to hear your perspective on the issues and opportunities for using the Belgian Blocks in an urban setting today. These discussions will inform the work conducted by PMA. We anticipate a draft of the technical report will be prepared in late spring, at which time BPS and PMA will return to the Commission for a second briefing and work session.

Following the completion of the technical report, BPS staff anticipates returning to the Landmarks Commission with follow-up meeting(s) to discuss potential changes to the approval criteria for deployment of Belgian Blocks, if any, as informed by the technical report. PBOT and BPS will also return to the Commission to discuss the use of blocks at the Earl Blumenauer Bridge landings.

We look forward to the discussion on March 22.

Attachment: Portland Belgian Blocks – Project Background, Issues to Explore, Timeline and Precedents

