

Sewer money for bikeways: Does it pass the smell test?

3-15-10

Portland must decide whether the plan is truly clever
or breaches public trust in how projects are funded

We've got to hand it to Portland Mayor Sam Adams when it comes to invention. His proposed diversion of \$20 million in the city's sewer budget to start building bicycle boulevards around town offers a fresh look at public finance.

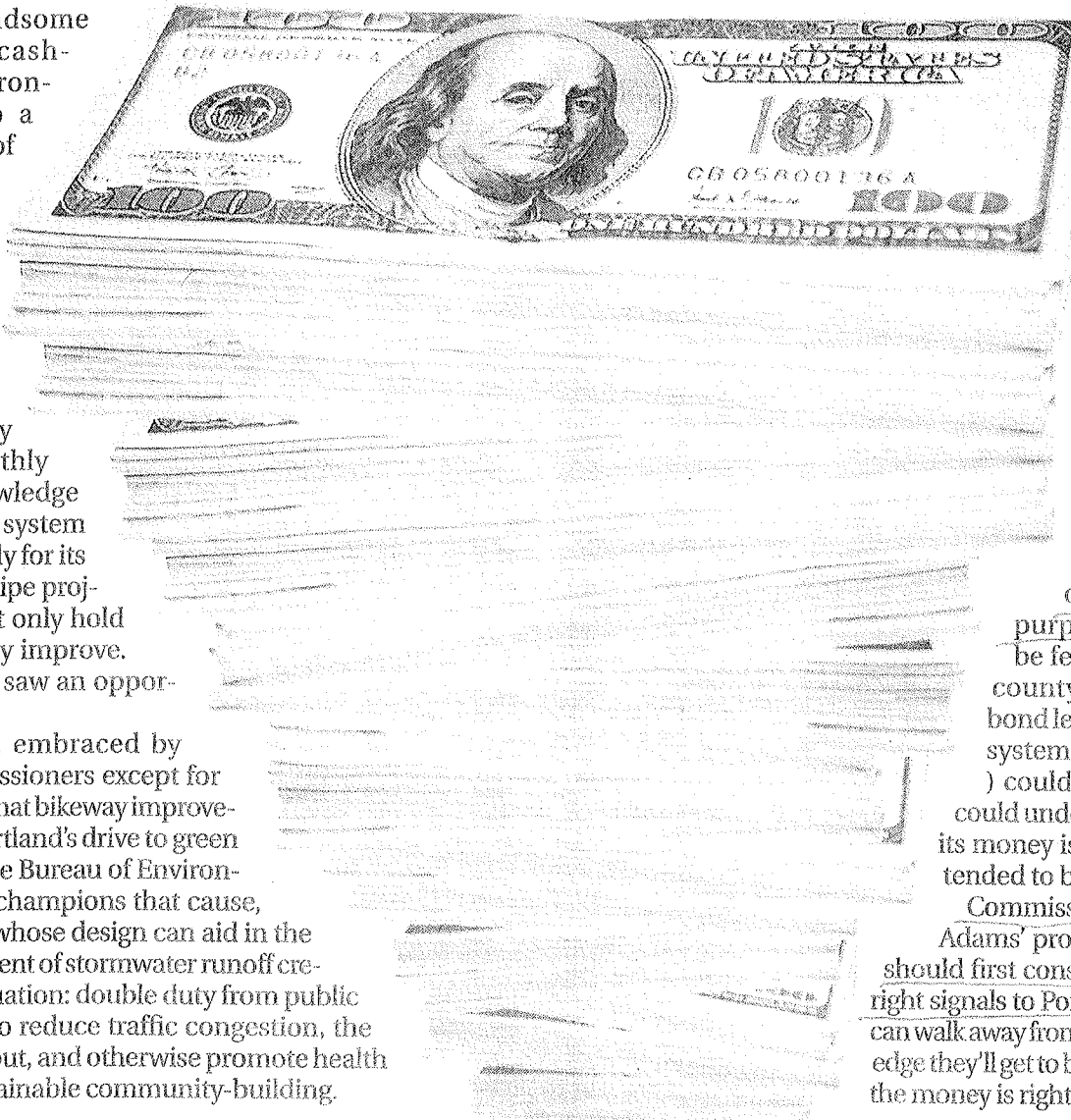
There's fine print, of course. More than \$15 million of that money was "saved" by the city's Bureau of Environmental Services from capital projects turning out not to cost as much as projected. As Janie Har reported in The Oregonian last week, one involves the expansion of a sludge digester at the Columbia Boulevard wastewater treatment plant, the bid for which came in \$6.7 million below anticipated cost.

That's a handsome sum in any cash-strapped environment, and so a happy Bureau of Environmental Services aimed that money at other needy projects. Portland's rate-payers would continue to pay their high monthly bills in the knowledge that their sewer system — famous already for its \$1.4 billion Big Pipe project — would not only hold up but also likely improve. Until the mayor saw an opportunity.

Adams' logic, embraced by the city's commissioners except for Amanda Fritz, is that bikeway improvements help in Portland's drive to green itself up. Since the Bureau of Environmental Services champions that cause, bike boulevards whose design can aid in the proper management of stormwater runoff create a win-win situation: double duty from public dollars. Bikes also reduce traffic congestion, the city's carbon output, and otherwise promote health and belief in sustainable community-building.

But wait. Stuck holding the bag in this transaction are those who pay handsomely to flush toilets, run showers — and withstand blinding rate increases. If July's anticipated rate hike of 7 percent goes through, it will mean the average monthly residential sewer bill in Portland will have risen nearly 95 percent, to more than \$57 per month, since 2000.

That's a handsome piece of change in an environment where it's increasingly important to know where our hard-earned money goes, and precisely why. Fritz did right in asking to know which of the bureau's improvement projects will be pushed aside as boulevards get built.



We like bicycles as much as we do properly functioning sewers. But keep in mind the mayor's \$20 million proposal is merely the first of many outlays for a \$600 million plan to create 700 miles of bikeways over the next 20 years. The same \$20 million diverted for another promising cause would deserve the same cautionary flag.

If we're going to get anywhere building a bike mecca, it will need, over time, to be from money originally named for that purpose. The sources could be federal, state, regional and county — perhaps, even, in a bond levy that Portlanders (sewer system ratepayers among them) could embrace. Anything less could undercut the public's trust that its money is being spent as it was intended to be.

Commissioners will likely approve Adams' proposal this week. But they should first consider whether it sends the right signals to Portlanders. If it doesn't, they can walk away from the proposal in the knowledge they'll get to building a bike mecca when the money is right and the authority is clear.

best bang for our buck out of our tax policy.

JON BARTHOLOMEW

Bartholomew is a policy advocate with the Oregon State Public Interest Research Group.

Bike paths not a priority

In receiving my water bill last week, I was aware that sewer fees were higher than my water usage. The rates are among the highest in the nation and are expected to rise. Now the Portland City Council has chosen to use sewer fees for bike paths. How can this be legal? Almost all of the citizens of Portland pay for water but few will use bike paths.

For the first time in history, Portlanders had to boil water in November because of contamination, and we were told that reservoirs could not be covered

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because it was too expensive. Why is the City Council spending our hard-earned money on expensive projects when Portland is hurting economically?

CAROL GRASVIK
Southwest Portland

Citizen weapons

Israel claims it needs to build 112 more apartment units in an Israeli Jewish-only settlement built in the Palestinian West Bank. Israel says it needs to build these to fill a "security gap" between buildings in the settlement. If indeed the location is insecure, then moving 112 families there is tantamount to using them as human shields. Israel could have built a section of its infamous wall that it builds freely across Palestinian lands and filled this "gap." Instead Israel is using its own citizens as demographic weapons against the

■ Guest columns, up to 500 words, may be sent by e-mail to commentary@news.oregonian.com. Submissions become the property of The Oregonian and will not be returned; they may be edited by e-mail at galenbarnett@news.oregonian.com

Saving and spending

About our sewer money going to the grand bike scheme of Sam Adams:
While I don't necessarily mind making Portland bike-friendly, I would ask him to fix the potholes first.

What amuses me is that he's seeding the project with \$20 million, \$15.4 million of which was "saved" from other projects. Does Portland "save" those savings? Nope. We figure out a new way to spend them. Yet another good reason the tax kicker is returned to us before legislators can spend their/our savings.

B-13 3-15-10 **JEFF HOCKLEY**
Southwest Portland

Bike fees make sense

I can't believe the expensive plan that Sam Adams has rolled out for bicycles to be paid for from our sewer fees. I have nothing against bicycles, and I have used one for years. What I can't understand is why bikers can't be asked to pay their own way. I grew up in Palo Alto, Calif., some 70 years ago, and bicycles had to be licensed. Why can't Portland use the same process for financing the forward-looking plan? User fees are the fairest option.

A-13 3-15-10 **CLOYD SWEIGERT**
Southwest Portland

PORTLAND CITY COUNCIL
COMMUNICATION REQUEST
Wednesday Council Meeting 9:30 AM

Council Meeting Date: March 17, 2010

Today's Date February 17, 2010

AUDITOR 02/17/10 AM 9:18

Name CHARLES E. LONG

Address 420 N.E. MASON ST. (APT. 307)

Telephone (503) 546-9467 Email _____

Reason for the request:

~~Requiem for a century of Pacific Coast
League baseball in Portland~~
STOP THE STRANGLEHOLD OF SPECIAL INTERESTS
ON CITY GOVERNANCE (Per Mr Long by phone 3-11.)

Charles E. Long
(signed)

- Give your request to the Council Clerk's office by Thursday at 5:00 pm to sign up for the following Wednesday Meeting. Holiday deadline schedule is Wednesday at 5:00 pm. (See contact information below.)
- You will be placed on the Wednesday Agenda as a "Communication." Communications are the first item on the Agenda and are taken promptly at 9:30 a.m. A total of five Communications may be scheduled. Individuals must schedule their own Communication.
- You will have 3 minutes to speak and may also submit written testimony before or at the meeting.

Thank you for being an active participant in your City government.

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