

City of Portland

2025-26 Parks Local Option Levy Hearing Minutes

Wednesday, October 15, 2025

1:30 P.M

1900 SW 4th Ave (2nd Floor, Council Chambers)

Portland, Oregon

Present:

TSCC:

Chair Harmony Quiroz,
Vice Chair Matt Donahue,
Commissioner Tod Burton, via Zoom
Commissioner Dr. Rita Moore,
Allegra Willhite, Executive Director,
Brittanie Abayare, Budget Analyst
Absent: Commissioner Allison Lugo Knapp

City of Portland Officials:

Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney,
Council Vice President Tiffany Koyama Lane,
Councilor Candace Avalos,
Councilor Jamie Dunphy,
Councilor Loretta Smith,
Councilor Sameer Kanal,
Councilor Dan Ryan,
Councilor Angelita Morillo, via Zoom,
Councilor Steve Novick,
Councilor Mitch Green,
Councilor Eric Zimmerman,

City Staff/Representatives:

Donna Paul, Deputy City Administrator for Public Works (DCA)
Sarah Huggins, Portland Parks and Recreation Bureau
Sonya Shymansky, Interim Director of Portland Parks and Recreation

Opening Remarks and Introductions

- Chair Harmony Quiroz officially called the Public Hearing on the City of Portland's Parks Local Option Levy Tax Measure to order on October 15, 2025.
- Chair Quiroz reminded attendees that the Tax Supervising and Conservation Commission (TSCC) is a community oversight commission established by the Oregon Legislature. The TSCC oversees the budgets of member taxing districts, conducts budget reviews and certification, and holds public hearings on proposed property tax measures, as detailed in state law. The purpose of the hearing is strictly to promote information sharing and give the public an opportunity to learn more about the proposed measure. Commissioners ask questions that they

believe a typical community member might ask, acting as representatives for those community members who cannot ask questions directly.

- Chair Quiroz noted that the TSCC does not take any action on or advocate for a position on the measure.
- Commissioners and City Council members introduced themselves

Public Comment

Public comment was limited to three minutes per person.

Written Comment:

- A written comment was received from **Babs Vanelli, a resident of Sullivan's Gulch and City Council District Two**. The comment praised the numerous parks and community centers and asked for support of the Parks Levy in whatever way possible. The comment also mentioned Governor Tom McCall and his work protecting Oregon's natural resources. Allegra stated that the public comment will in its entirety will be included on the TSCC website. [Babs Vanelli Written Testimony](#).

Online Testimony via Zoom:

- **Jessica Green, Executive Director of the Parks Foundation:**
 - Thanked the Commission for the opportunity to comment. She stated that Portlanders love their parks, which are essential public infrastructure, but years of underinvestment have left the system fragile. The 2020 Levy stabilized the system, keeping community centers open, restoring maintenance, and expanding access to low-cost/free recreation. The proposed rate increase is focused and necessary because the cost of services has increased and tax revenue has declined due to decreased property values. The proposal is designed to maintain safe, clean parks, sustain recreation access, and support frontline staff. New accountability measures include an oversight committee reporting directly to City Council, clear identification of levy-funded positions/operations in the annual budget, and measurable performance metrics to be adopted by year's end. She noted that deferred maintenance remains a challenge, but the renewal gives the City time and stability while critical, long-term solutions are developed. She urged support for the levy as a fiscally responsible and accountable investment.
- **Jessie Dryer, Portland Democratic Socialists of America (DSA):**
 - Expressed support for the Parks Levy on behalf of himself and the Portland DSA. He stated that parks are an "essential part of the city's quality of life".
- **Ben Gilbert, Portland DSA, Tenant in District Four:**
 - Stated that the Portland chapter of the DSA voted to endorse the Parks Levy 2025 ballot initiative. He said that if the levy is not approved, the operating budget would be cut

nearly in half, resulting in fewer programs and services. The Parks Levy would increase the property tax rate by \$0.60 per \$1,000 in assessed property value, meaning a median homeowner would pay about \$26 per month. He emphasized that parks are sites of community climate resilience, public health, and cross-cultural connection. While necessary, he called the levy an “imperfect tool” because relying on periodic levies for critical infrastructure is inequitable and unstable. He advocated that public goods should be guaranteed through progressive, permanent, and reliable funding paid for by taxing the wealthy and corporations. He referenced the wealth gap and proposed policies like Councilor Novick's proposal to increase the surcharge on corporations with highly skewed CEO-to-worker pay ratios.

Commissioner Questions and District Responses

Chair Quiroz asked: The measure shares three primary purposes: parks maintenance and cleanliness, protecting nature in a changing climate, and preserving program access. Roughly what percentage of levy dollars do you anticipate spending for each one of these areas?

Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney:

- Responded that the 2025 Parks Levy is intended to sustain the current Fiscal Year 25-26 service levels.
 - Parks maintenance and cleanliness: Approximately 40% of levy dollars.
 - Preserving program access: Approximately 40% of levy dollars.
 - Protecting nature in a changing climate: The remaining portion, which is smaller because the City has the opportunity to leverage Portland Clean Energy Funds (PCEF) to support that work.
- She noted that the balance may shift slightly to meet community needs, but the levy was specifically designed to sustain funding from the last budget. Specific fund allocations will occur during the annual budget process. The Parks Levy is estimated to raise about \$84 million in its first year.

Commissioner Moore asked: This levy is a tax increase. How do you respond to concerns about the tax burden contributing to the rising cost of living in Portland?

Councilor Eric Zimmerman:

- Stated that the City Council has taken seriously the increased cost of services and the burdens experienced by Portlanders.
- He stated that the City Council weighed the fact that the median increase is approximately \$11 per month and deemed it a reasonable tax increase.

- He cited community conversations and polling indicating that Portlanders support maintaining the parks and are willing to support a tax increase to avoid backsliding.
- He contrasted the property tax levy, which is universal and predictable, with other income taxes (like the Heavy Vehicle and Homeless Services (HHS) tax or Preschool for All), which are not indexed and contribute to the cost of living for wage earners.

Chair Quiroz asked: When the TSCC Commissioners met with the city in 2020, we asked what the plan was in five years when the Parks levy ended. Now here we are. At the time the mayor and commissioners planned to explore other options for long-term funding. What other options have been considered since then, and why are you opting for another short-term fix?

Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney:

- Noted that no one currently sitting on the dais was part of the previous system. She stated that a sustainable future for the parks system remains a critical goal. The park system today is a "very different park system" shaped by a global pandemic, a public housing crisis, and changing community use.
- Alternative options considered:
 - In 2022, a Ballot Initiative Task Force reviewed alternative funding options.
 - In 2023, the city prepared a legislative bill, House Bill 3515, seeking to change Oregon statute to allow for a city-governed Parks and Recreation District (a model used in Seattle and Olympia), but this bill was not successful..
 - In 2023 and 2024, the PP&R Bureau conducted two rounds of voter polling to test support for bonds and various levy approaches.
- She affirmed the commitment to develop a long-range financial plan over the next few years. The resolution to refer this levy holds the city accountable to completing this work by the end of Fiscal Year 27-28.

Vice Chair Donahue asked: We understand other local option levies will likely be impacted by compression due to this increase. What conversations have you had with jurisdictions who will be impacted? Are they supportive of this measure?

Councilor Loretta Smith:

- Acknowledged that a local option levy will compress other local option levies.
 - Three other levies are impacted for FY 26-27:
 - Portland Children's Levy (estimated at approximately \$820,000).
 - Metro Natural Area Levy (estimated at approximately \$196,000).
 - Oregon Historical Society through Multnomah County (estimated at approximately \$102,000).

- The City resolved to make an appropriation in the annual budget from the Parks Levy Fund to the Children's Levy Investment Fund to make up for the lost revenue.
- She noted that the city has many agreements with Metro and Multnomah County and welcomes discussions. While specific cost levy discussions have not occurred, conversations were robust, and these impacts will not come as a surprise to the entities.

Commissioner Burton asked: Will all local option levy dollars go towards enhancing and preserving current services? Are any new programs expected to be added as a result of the levy?

Councilor Angelita Morillo:

- Stated that the levy dollars are designed to support current services, including daily parks maintenance, small-scale facility and asset maintenance, and recreation programs (like sports, community center classes, and Summer Free for All events). The levy also preserves programs that were funded with one-time resources in FY 25-26 and would otherwise expire, such as environmental education programs (Nature Day Camp, Teen Nature Team Internships, Youth Conservation Crew), and maintaining current community center hours.
- New Programs/Positions:
 - The levy would add one FTE staff position dedicated to financial partnerships and revenue generation.
 - \$0.03 of the \$1.40 rate would be specifically for capital maintenance projects, such as repairing bathrooms, playgrounds, and cottages. These funds will be distributed among the four Council districts, with Council members recommending which needs to advance.

Follow up from Commissioner Burton: How much reliance will Parks have on the city's General Fund if the levy passes? Will the General Fund continue to be the primary source of operating revenues?

Councilor Mitch Green:

- Stated that if the levy passes, the General Fund and the Parks Levy will be nearly even in terms of operating revenue support, each forecasted to provide about \$90 million per year on average over the five-year period. The Council referred the levy to sustain services, not to offset future ongoing General Fund expenses, an intention and commitment that was included in the resolution.

Follow up from Commissioner Burton: We understand the current levy follows a leveraged funding model to ensure all General Fund dollars are spent before using levy dollars. Will that hold true for the new levy as well?

Donna Paul, Deputy City Administrator for Public Works (DCA):

- Stated that yes, the new levy will follow the same leveraged funding model. This means that all General Fund dollars are spent first before using levy dollars, allowing levy dollars to serve as an additional resource. This approach has been

effective at streamlining the use of multiple funding sources and ensures frontline supervisors manage one unified budget. An outside auditor reviewed the model during the 2020 Parks Levy audit and concluded it was appropriate and effective.

Follow up from Vice Chair Donahue: Can you explain the leveraged funding model in layman's terms? How would you describe it so the public can understand?

Sarah Huggins, Portland Parks and Recreation Bureau:

- There is a separate fund for Parks Levy resources.
- At the end of each year, the Bureau calculates the eligible pool of expenditures based on levy commitments.
- They then move over the appropriate percentage amount from the Levy fund to cover the Levy's share of those expenditures.
- The dollars stay in the Parks Levy Fund until the end of the fiscal year and transfer at one time. This is to ensure the commitments in the levy language are met from this funding.

Follow up from Chair Quiroz: Portland suffers from a structural deficit where tax receipts are insufficient to maintain services, never mind tackle the \$600M maintenance backlog. The audit released this morning discusses the challenges of ongoing maintenance funding. Is there work also being done around a strategic plan for long-term maintenance/operations (including new community centers)?

Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney:

- Stated that just as the Council referred to the levy, they had a robust conversation about asset management at the city generally. The Administration is expected to deliver a plan next summer (end of summer 2026) on how to better maintain city assets broadly, which will include parks. She clarified that the capital maintenance piece of this levy focuses on things Portlanders interact with daily, like bathrooms, but the broader maintenance backlog will be discussed as part of the capital maintenance plan. Operations costs for new assets expected to come online during the levy's life were included in the calculations to ensure service levels continue.

Interim Director Sonya Shymansky:

- Added that the Bureau appreciated the recent audit exercise, which brought organizing conversations into sharper focus. The plan involves common-sense approaches: 1) Figure out the desired size and shape of the park system (level of service), 2) Figure out how to pay for it (funding sustainability plan), and 3) Align policy and budget decisions. She stated that they agreed with all the audit recommendations and looked forward to implementing them.

Vice Chair Donahue asked: How do you ensure that the funds are distributed equitably across the city and benefiting all residents?

Councilor Jamie Dunphy:

- Stated that as Councilors elected from specific districts, understanding fund distribution across districts is important, while also using a city-wide lens. The Bureau utilizes an equity and anti-racism lens when supporting funding and program development.
- A budget note was included in the FY 25-26 adopted budget directing a report of budget and performance metrics by district for both Parks and Transportation.
- The \$0.03 for capital maintenance will be distributed among the four Council districts, allowing Council members to recommend specific maintenance and replacement opportunities in their district.
- The levy will provide funding for operation and maintenance (O&M) for new parks that came online during the 2020 Levy and those scheduled to open soon (estimated \$45 million over five years), helping to address inequities in access.
- The levy also supports programs such as the Access Pass (reduced pricing), Free Lunch and Play (summer program for youth 18 and under), the Teen Collaborative Initiative (serving Eastern East Portlanders), and free teen programs.

Commissioner Burton asked: The resolution says the new levy will “improve the health and equitable distribution of our tree canopy”. In our spring budget conversation, you mentioned clean energy fund dollars also supporting trees across the City. How will levy dollars be spent for this purpose, and how does that differ from what clean energy dollars fund?

Council Vice President Tiffany Koyama Lane:

- Stated that both the levy and Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF) resources support this work.
- Levy and General Fund Dollars: Generally fund Urban Forestry management and ongoing programming.
 - Example: These dollars fund the staff who are organizing and running giveaway events.
- PCEF Resources: Are focused on specific initiatives, supporting new plantings and additional services provided by Urban Forestry.
 - This includes establishing an Equitable Tree Canopy Program (to plant at least 15,000 trees over five years), developing a new street tree maintenance program, arborist training, and covering the cost/burden of tree care for low-income households.
 - Example: PCEF dollars might purchase the trees for a yard giveaway program.

Commissioner Moore asked: It has been suggested that if the levy does not pass, the subsequent budget shortfall will require elimination of routine maintenance and minor repairs. Is that the anticipated response? And if so, what process will you use to prioritize which maintenance and repair projects to

complete?

Councilor Steve Novick

- Stated that if Parks loses over 40% of its funding, it would be virtually impossible to avoid cuts to routine maintenance, minor repairs in outdoor parks and natural areas, and the operation of community centers and programming.
- City Council would have to use the annual budget process to prioritize reductions.
- Bureaus develop reduction options in December and January; the Mayor releases the proposed budget by May 5th; and City Council adopts the budget in mid-June.
- A reduction of more than 40% would likely require more than the standard amount of time to prepare for. He added that this is one reason the Council chose to move the levy forward now instead of waiting until the spring.

Chair Quiroz asked: A question for the city councilors - what do you believe is the most compelling reason for this levy to be passed?

Council President Pirtle-Guiney stated that the Council cannot speak directly to votes but would use this opportunity to share why this was the right levy to refer. One Councilor from each district, along with council leadership, responded:

- **Councilor Eric Zimmerman (District Four):**
 - Stated that the most compelling reason is protecting childhood recreation and public access. He believes anything the community does that is pro-social should have support in a world that has become "far more individualized and less social or antisocial". The system meets every age group, from seniors using spaces at 10:00 AM to after-school kids at 3:00 PM.
- **Councilor Candace Avalos (District One):**
 - Stated that the most compelling reason is that it keeps Portland's commitment to equity and access at the heart of the parks system. For East Portland, it represents continued investment in communities that have historically gone without, noting that District One has only one community center in East Portland. Passing the levy is a statement of values that East Portland deserves the same level of care and opportunity as every other part of the city.
- **Councilor Steve Novick (District Three):**
 - Stated that the most compelling reason is the beauty of the outdoor parks and the visible importance of the facilities and activities in the community centers to thousands of Portlanders.
- **Council Vice President Tiffany Koyama Lane (District Three):**

- Shared that in personal conversations with parents at children's sporting events, they emphasize the broad community support for the levy. And there was broad support from many different groups across the political spectrum here in Portland. She believes it reflects Portlanders caring about keeping parks safe, accessible, and thriving.
- **Council President Elana Pirtle-Guiney (District Two):**
 - The vast majority of Portlanders use a park at least once a week, making it incumbent upon the City to maintain these assets that Portlanders use regularly and value.
 - She noted that the City Council worked diligently during the last budget cycle to ensure a level of park maintenance that Portlanders expect. They explained that this standard could not be sustained without additional support from the community through the levy.
 - They emphasized that the levy funding is essential to maintain parks and public assets that the vast majority of residents use regularly. The councilor concluded by stating that it is the Council's responsibility to ensure continued investment in the shared community, preserving what Portlanders have built together and deeply value.

Closing Remarks

Chair Quiroz thanked everyone for their arguments in support of the levy and expressed appreciation for their time, perspectives, and willingness to answer questions. She extended best wishes for their efforts moving forward.

There being no other business, Chair Quiroz closed the meeting.