



The Oregonian

And a couplet runs through it

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An unusually long day at City Hall, Portland's theater-in-the-round, featured two diverting morning trailers and a six-hour main event highlighted by a children's choir, cinematic hyperbole and an annoyingly clumsy finale.

In Wednesday's morning session, the City Council got an update on the utterly dysfunctional oversight committee that's monitoring the drug- and prostitution-free zones in the city and a preview of the mounting concern that city parks are for sale to corporations willing to pay for what the taxpayers won't.

The council tabled discussion of the parks issue for two weeks. And after hearing that the oversight committee isn't public, impartial or productive, ordered it back to work, authorizing the exclusion zones for another six months.

Commissioner Sam Adams didn't vote on that extension; he was saving his strength and his vocal cords for the afternoon blockbuster, the contentious debate over the West Burnside/Couch couplet.

Adams vigorously renovated a five-year-old plan that will turn Burnside and Couch into one-way streets between Northwest Second and 19th avenues and add a new streetcar line on Burnside.

Adams argues Burnside is "a broken street," a psychological and physical barrier between Portland's Old Town and the downtown business district and a plague upon the land and its pedestrians.

In lauding the couplet, Adams spoke of gateways, swales, public plazas and "humanizing" Burnside. Business owners and developers described Burnside as a wasteland of empty storefronts, locked doors and treacherous crosswalks.

"My customers don't like it; businesses have avoided it," said Michael Powell, the godfather of Powell's Books. "This is an opportunity to fix something that needs fixing, so that instead of being slightly embarrassed by the shabbiness of this main street through our city, we can be proud."

To counter the march of progress, couplet foes first hauled out the 6-year-olds, who decried -- with surprising eloquence -- what the increased traffic along the parade route would mean to the Cathedral School and Emerson Charter School.

Another 70 folks rose to lend their despair to the kids' chorale. The vast majority argued the couplet would not merely revitalize the sullen neighborhood that is Old Town but destroy the quiet residential mecca around St. Mary's Parish.

An occasional renegade like Ray Mathis piped up that the remake is a cynical boon for developers. "You can add streetcars or other trinkets to this sow, but you still end up with an ugly pig," Mathis said.

What quickly became clear was the view that Burnside would get well at Couch's expense; that the council would stop the couplet at Northwest 15th, answering all the Cathedral School prayers; and that Erik Sten's

vote was the vote that mattered.

Adams and Randy Leonard favored the couplet. But Mayor Tom Potter worried how it would fit in with the Central City plan, and Dan Saltzman admitted he was "tram-itized" by cost questions and wanted to keep the "enhanced" Burnside plan on the design table.

"Let's be blunt," Sten said: "We have a Planning Bureau that's trying to undermine this project." He insisted the couplet be tied to a funded streetcar that is integrated into the Central City update. Once that coupling occurred, the council voted 5-0 to fund preliminary engineering on the couplet.

"I believe this thing can be a huge winner," Sten said. "Once each side wins a little, and some history gets made, both sides will get together and negotiate some possibilities that aren't on the table right now."

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