

Portland Botanical Gardens lands option to buy site

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The old McCormick & Baxter creosote plant is a Superfund site but may eventually be the site of the proposed Portland Botanical Gardens in North Portland. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

By Dennis Peck, for The Oregonian/OregonLive

The proposed Portland Botanical Gardens has taken a major step forward, landing an option to buy a 59-acre North Portland Superfund site along the Willamette River.

The purchase and sale agreement gives the nonprofit organization, formed in 2020, a year to finalize a deal for the former site of the McCormick & Baxter creosote plant situated between Metro's Willamette Cove property and the University of Portland's Franz River campus.

"It's a bright, shiny project for Portland," said Sean Hogan, executive director of the botanical gardens group. "We hope people are as excited about it as we are."

The botanical gardens would include pavilions, outdoor pathways, offices and research facilities, as well as public access to a stretch of Willamette River beach.



An aerial view and graphic shows proposed site along the Willamette River in North Portland. Portland Botanical Gardens

The goal, Hogan said, is to open two-thirds of the property, currently privately held, to the public free of charge.

Because the property is a Superfund site (cleanup was completed in 2005), the state Department of Environmental Quality and federal Environmental Protection Agency play a major role in vetting a potential purchaser and will require the new owner to continue to care for the property.

In fact, even though McCormick & Baxter remains the legal owner, the DEQ must approve any sale, according to DEQ project manager Sarah Miller.

"The site has been studied to pieces," Hogan said, "and we're in negotiations with the DEQ and the EPA, who have been very reasonable."

And while having a site to show to neighborhood associations, Native American groups, would-be donors and any affected agencies is a significant step, hurdles remain before the Portland Botanical Gardens becomes a reality -- such as completing the transportation study.



The McCormick & Baxter creosote plant Superfund site in N. Portland, seen here on Fri., April 26, 2024, may eventually become the location of the Portland Botanical Gardens. The proposed project that would fill the area between Metro's Willamette Cove property and the University of Portland's Franz River campus. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

And raising the money to build the facilities.

Scot Medbury was in charge of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden for 14 years and is acting as a senior strategic adviser for the Portland group.

"What ensures longevity is money," he said. "It's much easier to raise funds for the build, but sustaining it over time becomes the key."

Medbury says in his experience funding can come from a combination of memberships, a donor base, even an endowment, and some kind of public-private partnership.

"These things aren't free," he said. "What it will take to feed this annually is quite a lot."

Even so, he remains optimistic.

"It's inspiring, all the people at all levels who have lent their support," he said. According to Hogan, who owns Cistus Design Nursery on Sauvie Island, that support includes \$300,000 in donations and more than 10,000 hours of volunteer labor.

And Hogan can't wait to take his pitch for the botanical gardens — complete with potential home — to any and all groups to get their input.

“This allows us to begin engaging with Portland’s communities and neighborhoods,” Hogan said. “We want them to be on the ground floor of designing what we hope will be one of the great botanical gardens of the world.”



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ABOUT PORTLAND BOTANICAL GARDENS

Portland Botanical Gardens aims to cultivate a community where people connect, discover, and celebrate the beauty, strength, and resilience of plants. In a city known for its gardens, PBG celebrates the diversity, resilience, and importance of plants, striving to create a collaborative, cooperative, and immersive experience for organizations and individuals in Portland, the United States, and across the globe to connect to the natural world. Built on the foundation of “nature for all,” PBG will be a leader in horticultural training, research, and environmental justice and equity. Through educational programs and innovative facilities and collections, visitors will get a unique glance into the planet’s diverse flora and the effects humans have on it for a one-of-a-kind botanical experience.

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