

**Testimony of John A. Charles, Jr.  
Before the Metro Council  
Regarding allocation of \$15.6 million of bond funds  
for the Willamette Cove Nature Park  
March 12, 2026**

Metro purchased the [Willamette Cove](#) property in 1996. In December 2000, EPA identified the lower Portland Harbor as a Superfund site due to toxic contamination found. The Oregon DEQ then established a “remedial action for hazardous waste clean-up” of the [Willamette Cove Uplands](#).

Unfortunately, these actions converted Willamette Cove from an asset to a liability. Those liabilities created long-term financial risks for Metro that have not been properly vetted.

[Res. 26-5582](#) appropriates \$15.6 million from [2019 Parks Bond](#) for design and construction of the Park. However, nowhere in the Resolution does it address the costs of maintenance or operations. The [staff report](#) from the [March 5, 2026](#), Council meeting states that “Development of a nature park will also include clarifying the long-term operations and maintenance requirements. Current revenues do not cover operations and maintenance costs across the entire parks system, so additional maintenance costs will strain the system.”

This is not a new problem. Metro Auditor Suzanne Flynn noted in her [Parks Audit](#) of April 2012: “More clarity is needed to strategically plan **what** maintenance will be done, **who** will do it, and **how** it will be funded.” [emphasis added]

That problem needs to be addressed now.

Other risks identified in the [Master Plan](#) include:

- Long-term monitoring for in-water cleanup will be conducted “in perpetuity.”
- Upland remediation will require a “cap inspection and maintenance plan” and a “community and outreach plan.”

Where will that money come from?

In 2008, soils with elevated metal concentrations were removed from the central upland portion of Willamette Cove. In 2013, the [Oregon Health Authority](#) [recommended](#) closure of the site for public health and safety due to contamination.



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Additional remedial actions occurred in 2015 and 2016, when soils with the highest risks to human health of dioxins and furans were removed from the upland area. Excavated areas were subsequently replanted with native vegetation. (See [Willamette Cove Site Conservation Plan.](#))

But according to the Master Plan:

Despite these actions, contamination remains throughout the site and within the river, continuing to pose risks to human health and the environment.”

At the time of writing, the cleanup plans are still being developed. The final conditions of the site after remediation remain uncertain, and therefore the master plan will need to be applied flexibly in order to respond to these unknown conditions.

A question for the Council: What if costs increase substantially from all the unknowns and uncertainties? The proposed budget includes NO CONTINGENCY for construction.

Finally, the current site includes 1,682 trees larger than 1.5 inches in diameter, and 80 percent are native. But remediation will require removal of all trees on site.

So, there won't be any nature in the nature park for at least 30 years, and the cove itself is not even natural. As the Master Plan notes, “The Cove owes its existence to site alterations made in the industrial era, most notably the building of the BNSF abutment and associated dredging.”

To sum up, this is a man-made water feature with industrial contamination that may or may not get cleaned up adequately, with 27 acres of land that will soon be stripped of all vegetation. What is the value proposition?

As fiduciaries you could be held personally liable for mismanagement of public funds if things go sideways, as they frequently do with Superfund sites. I suggest you take more time to think about these risks before you approve spending \$15.6 million on what is likely to be just a down payment.

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Editor's Note: On **3/12/2026**, **John Charles** testified at the *Metro Council meeting* on [Resolution 26-5582](#) to use 2019 Bond funds on the Willamette Cove Nature Park. [Video](#) of John's testimony occurs at [01:10:10](#).

