

Out at the [Port of Portland's Terminal 2](#), the only signs of life on this particular day are two big birds of prey and Bob Sallinger, the conservation director for the [Audubon Society of Portland](#). He's probably the only person within a mile's radius eagle-eyed enough to identify the birds.

"This is really basically an abandoned site," Sallinger said from a perch just outside the chain-link fence that guards this Northwest Portland cargo terminal. "It's just vacant parking lots and unused cranes and empty warehouses. So really the only activity at all over the last half an hour or so has been these two bald eagles that have been sitting on this light post in the middle of the parking lot."

The silence helps explain why representatives of the Portland Diamond Project, the group trying to bring Major League Baseball to Oregon, sounded so optimistic last month. They announced a tentative deal [to develop Terminal 2](#), owned by the Port of Portland and all but unused in recent years, as a potential baseball stadium and mixed-use development.

"If everything happens the way we expect it to," Portland Diamond Project spokesman John McIsaac said, "we expect the first pitch to happen in 2022."

But there's at least one big logistical hurdle between that rosy prediction and making sunny summer nights watching baseball on the west bank of the Willamette River a reality.



The Port of Portland's Terminal 2, visible from across the Willamette River in Northeast Portland on Monday, Dec. 24, 2018. The Fremont Bridge is visible in the background.

Bryan M. Vance/OPB

Terminal 2 – and pretty much everything around it on this stretch of the Willamette Riverfront– is zoned for industrial use. That means it's been set aside, and legally protected, for uses such as manufacturing, shipping and construction.

The people who care about such things are already prepping for a fight.

“Industrial land is such a finite resource in the Portland area right now,” said Ellen Wax, executive director of the [Working Waterfront Coalition](#), a business group that represents the interests of big waterfront users such as Union Pacific, Advanced American Construction and Gunderson Inc. “I don’t know what their strategy is for being able to justify removing this land. But it seems like a pretty high bar.”

In another state, none of this might matter. But Oregon prides itself on smart, balanced growth. The law actually requires communities to keep a certain amount of industrial land tucked away. Preserving land for economic growth is [No. 9](#) on the state’s [19-point list of land use planning goals](#).

“These industrial businesses are really the best paying jobs for people without college degrees. We call them middle-wage jobs,” said Tom Armstrong, a supervising planner with the city of Portland. “And so our ability to have this industrial base in our city provides those jobs that contributes to the diversity of our city. It’s one of the central tenets of how we approach land use in this state.”

Industrial land grows even more precious along waterways such as the Willamette River because it’s even harder to replace.

Because of its riverfront location, Terminal 2 actually has extra special zoning protection – something called a prime industrial overlay. City Council members approved that two years ago, and it just took effect this past summer.

That doesn’t mean this property can’t be rezoned, just that it could be an incredibly arduous process.

Portland Diamond Project leaders are now in the process of starting negotiations with the city and the Port over precisely how to build a stadium at Terminal 2. Planners and people more familiar with the land-use process are less optimistic, at least about the timing. Rezoning Terminal 2 would require the approval of the city planning commission, the Portland City Council and the Metro regional council. Opponents would get multiple opportunities to appeal along the way.

“Just the land use action, preparing all the papers and such to get it through the city, could be a year. Then a year to review it, then appeals, then the rest of the process,” Wax said. “I could see four to five years.”

That’s four to five years before construction even starts.

But there is another, faster way. Imagine a scenario in which city and regional leaders decide everything about a stadium deal makes sense – say, the Diamond Project proves to them that a ballpark really can get built with minimal public money and that there’s a team out there ready to start playing in Portland the moment a new stadium opens.

In a case like that, baseball proponents and city leaders could go directly to the Oregon Legislature. Lawmakers don’t use it often, but they have the power to essentially step in and decide local land-use issues with the legislative version of one swing of the bat.

Armstrong, the Portland planner, can’t remember the last time that happened in Portland. But it occurred just a few years ago in Washington County when legislators signed off on a [“grand bargain”](#) that expanded the urban growth boundary and set urban and rural reserves in the county.

“This was a legal process that was going to take several more years, so they waved their magic wand as legislators,” said Ed Sullivan, a long-time land use attorney in the Portland region. “To me, that’s a dangerous precedent because it makes it easy – if you’ve got a sticky issue, you just go to the Legislature instead of through our planning process. But you could do that in the baseball case.”

That prospect has the potential to create an unusual political alliance between environmentalists and industrial businesses. Industry officials such as Ellen Wax worry that the loss of Terminal 2 could mean fewer future jobs.

Environmentalists such as Bob Sallinger fear rezoning Terminal 2 will mean Portland leaders will feel pressured to find replacement industrial land, and that they’ll target undeveloped and ecologically significant space elsewhere, such as West Hayden Island in North Portland.



The Port of Portland's Terminal 2 sits empty on Monday, Dec. 24, 2018.

Bryan M. Vance/OPB

“Our fear is that in the race to get a baseball stadium, the other issues that are at play will get ignored,” Sallinger said. “We are concerned that the Legislature could step in for that and that this grand vision could override the actual implications of this decision.”

