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Hot Tip

A top city fire official is under investigation for turning a blind eye to safety violations at a sex club.



ILLUSTRATION: WW Staff

A senior Portland fire official is under investigation for telling a downtown sex club the city would look the other way if it violated fire safety laws.

In late June, [Portland Fire & Rescue](#) denied a permit to Ron Jeremy's [Club Sesso](#) for an anniversary party because the club's renovation project was unfinished.

WW has obtained a transcript of a telephone call between Assistant Fire Marshal Doug Jones and Club Sesso's manager in which Jones signaled the manager he could ignore the fire bureau's objections to the event.

Yet on June 28, with the party in full swing, a fire inspector arrived at Club Sesso and found the club in violation of city code. Records show Jones, a 33-year fire bureau veteran who was not on duty that night, soon showed up at the club and intervened. The club's attorney later said Jones overruled the inspector, saying "that there would be no repercussions from the Fire Bureau as a result of the lack of permits."

The records raise serious questions about whether Jones granted the club special treatment and, if so, why. Records show the fire bureau initially tried to ignore the Club Sesso incident. It was only after a whistle-blower went to City Ombudsman Margie Sollinger on Aug. 11 that an investigation by the city's Bureau of Human Resources began.

The fire bureau refused multiple requests to make Chief Erin Janssens available for questions and declined to provide *WW* with a photograph of Jones, although city employee photos are public records. City Fire Marshal Nate Takara declined to comment. Jones declined to explain his actions. "There are a lot of pieces to this," Jones tells *WW*. "We are trying to resolve issues with this business."

Porn star Ron Jeremy opened Club Sesso at 824 SW 1st Ave., the former location of the tapas restaurant Fernando's Hideaway, in June 2009. Sesso bills itself as an "upscale, high-energy swingers club" where patrons have sex, often in view of other customers.

Admission is members-only, and pricing reflects demand: A one-year membership for a single woman is \$50; for couples, it's \$100; and for a single male, \$150. Among the club's many rules, the most important may be "don't be creepy."

The fire bureau's stated mission is simple, according to its website: "Portland Fire & Rescue aggressively and safely protects life, property, and the environment." The bureau also demands ethical behavior from its officials. "We set high standards for ourselves," the bureau says.

The Fire Marshal's Office is responsible for safety inspections of buildings, with a particular focus on nightclubs and music venues that attract large crowds. Club Sesso says it regularly hosts 200 to 300 people, but the number can increase during special events. The club claims it hosted 1,000 people for its most recent Halloween party.

Since opening in 2009, the club has regularly received special events permits from the Fire Marshal's Office allowing use of the third story of the building, which was constructed in 1880.

But when the club sought a permit for a June 28 anniversary party, the office raised two issues. First, it wanted a security plan for accommodating large crowds and, second, it wanted to make sure the third floor met safety code requirements for emergency and exit lighting.

An email from Patrick Owen, a city liquor-licensing inspector, shows that Club Sesso's manager, Paul Smith, complained when the fire bureau did not immediately issue a permit for the June event.

"Paul was agitated, felt submitting security plan would be undue burden," Owen wrote June 25. "Paul said he was very frustrated with Fire Bureau for refusing to permit upper area and felt City was trying to 'shut him down' due to nature of the business."

Smith told fire marshal inspectors he'd hire eight to 10 security guards to help maintain safety at the anniversary event, records show. Nonetheless, fire marshal officials refused to grant the permit.

"Rec'd notice from Fire Bureau no special event permit would be issued due to unpermitted work," Owen wrote June 26.

The permit denial had financial consequences for Club Sesso, which had planned to charge men \$75 to attend.

On June 27, the day before the anniversary party, Club Sesso manager Smith spoke to Assistant Fire Marshal Jones on the phone.

Smith recorded the phone call, and Club Sesso's attorney, Ted M. Brindle, later provided city officials a transcript:

Assistant Fire Marshal Jones: "Paul, I'm going to tell you what I know. I'm going to be very careful here, and I have some other things to say, but first of all I'm going to tell you what I know about tomorrow night, OK?"

Club Sesso's Smith: "OK."

Jones: "Here is what I know. Right now, I don't think anything is going to change. I have night inspectors out tonight. I do not believe, I'm just telling you [in] general the way my office is running, I do not believe I have any night inspectors out tomorrow night, which is Saturday night [June 28]. Um, it is kind of a down weekend for us because of the next weekend."

Smith: "Yeah, because the Fourth [of July] is huge, yeah."

Jones: "Um, so, now I'm going to move on. I'm just telling you some things that I know about what we are doing this weekend that may or may not be helpful to you."

Smith: "Understood."

Jones: "I'm going to move on past that; you can do whatever you want with that, that you think is right."

Smith: "You have limited resources, people can't work 24 hours a day."

Jones: "So, if that affects your decision, so be it. I'm throwing it out there for that reason, to maybe help you figure out your decision."

Smith: "I appreciate that."



"DO WHATEVER YOU WANT WITH THAT": A transcript shows Portland Assistant Fire Marshal Doug Jones advising Club Sesso's manager how the club could ignore potential fire-code violations.

IMAGE: KATU

According to Club Sesso, the conversation between Jones and Smith led the club manager to believe it was OK to hold the party despite the denial of permits.

"Mr. Smith initially indicated that he was inclined to not even open the club [June 28] for fear of administrative reprisals by the fire department," Club Sesso attorney Brindle wrote in a July 18 letter. "During that conversation Mr. Smith was specifically led to believe there would not be any such consequences."

In a brief interview with *WW*, Jones did not deny making the comments, but he said the transcript represented only part of the conversation with Smith. Jones agreed to answer more questions at a later time, and then didn't respond to calls.

Still, Club Sesso held its party based on the representations Jones made to Smith in the June 27 call.

But at 10:40 on the night of the event, two **Oregon Liquor Control Commission** inspectors and an inspector from the city Fire Marshal's Office, Rob Crusier, strode into Club Sesso's party.

The OLCC inspectors cited Club Sesso for serving alcohol in unpermitted areas. Crusier noted Club Sesso was operating without proper permits.

But Club Sesso personnel summoned Jones, who was not on duty. He drove 29 miles from his home in Sandy to the club.

A letter from Club Sesso's attorney, Brindle, describes what happened next.

"Jones spoke with two of the club personnel and stated to both in an unsolicited comment, that he came down to see what Paul Smith's decision was regarding whether to open the club," Brindle wrote in the July 18 letter to the OLCC.

"He further stated, again without solicitation, that [fire inspector] Rob Crusier was not on the schedule to work that night. Finally, the Fire Department that evening specifically decided that there would be no repercussions from the Fire Bureau as a result of the lack of permits."

In the presence of two OLCC inspectors and Club Sesso personnel, who knew the event lacked a permit, Jones overruled his inspector's concerns.

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the fire bureau, wants to know why Jones did that.

"I take the allegations...very seriously and have asked that the Bureau of Human Resources to conduct an independent investigation," Saltzman tells *WW*. "Until that process is concluded, I will withhold further comment."