

# Hall Monitor: Calculated Risk

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News

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## A New Chapter of Accountability in City Hall

by Alex Zielinski



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**May 4** was the last day of work for Risk Manager Kate Wood.

Wood's departure, which went largely unnoticed in the recent rush of bureau resignations, has (hopefully) allowed for a new chapter of accountability in city hall. According to city staff, that's because Wood refused to do a key part of her job: listening to what the city calls **"fair and moral" claims**.

These types of claims come from citizens who believe they've incurred unfair expenses at the hands of city employees—for instance, if a city vehicle runs over a bike, or if a city water leak floods someone's basement with sewage. Under Portland's "fair and moral obligations" to its

citizens, a rule written into the city charter in 1946, the city is **responsible for compensating citizens** for these kind of claims—that is, if a committee finds the claims to be justified.

At least, that was the case until 1990, when Portland City Council transferred the responsibility to the city’s Risk Management Division. This reshuffling was meant to streamline the process. It didn’t happen. Risk Management staff instead **ignored these claims**—and their legal obligation to hear them—for 25 years.

Then, in September 2016, Nguyet Le’s house blew up. Le owned a rental home that was wrecked by **Portland police explosives** after a man suspected of murder barricaded himself inside. Le was left with \$25,000 in damages and more than \$4,300 in lost rent.

When she brought her complaints to the city, the Risk Management office **offered \$5,000 and shrugged**, claiming Le’s only other option was to sue the city for restitution.

But Portland Ombudsman Margie Sollinger, whose job it is to help citizens wronged by the city, reminded city council that this decision blatantly **breaks the law**. According to the city charter, Le is owed a committee hearing.

Thanks to Sollinger’s wrangling, Le’s case became the first heard by a claims committee in over two decades. At her April 6 hearing, orchestrated by Sollinger and chaired by City Auditor Mary Hull Caballero and Commissioner Amanda Fritz, Le detailed the extent of her financial losses. **“Please help me,”** she asked, presenting various cost estimates from contractors.

Wood sat at one end of the table. After Le left the room, Wood announced that since joining Risk Management in 2007, she had never been asked to review these claims—and **wasn’t going to start doing it now**. “It’s unfamiliar to us. It’s not work that we’ve agreed to do,” Wood said.

“You may not have been doing this before, but **you were required to**,” Hull Caballero reminded Wood. “You are relitigating a decision that has already been made.”

Wood wasn’t having it. But neither were the elected officials in the room—and they didn’t try to mask it. “I’m at the **end of my patience**,” Hull Caballero told Wood.

It was an awkward, confusing moment. No matter how many times Wood was told to do her job, she deflected. The meeting was **inconclusive**, and a decision to do... well, *anything* was indefinitely put on hold.

Less than a month after the meeting took place, **Wood resigned**.

This twist triggered a sigh of relief among city staff involved with the tangle she’d created. Instead of trying to work around a person **rigidly stuck in their ways**, the city can plow forward with a new manager who’ll be open to hearing citizen claims.

This week, city commissioners will vote to issue a \$25,514 check to Le for their **irrevocable damage** to her property.