

The Oregonian

Portland snowstorm: With or without Mayor Charlie Hales, city's response would have been the same

By Brad Schmidt

Add this to Portland's clichéd motto about being "The City that Works":

Portland gets its work done, with or without the mayor.

Portland officials who weathered the Willamette Valley's strongest snowstorm in five years said Sunday that Mayor Charlie Hales' visit to South Africa didn't short-circuit the city's response to snow or ice. If anything, they say, it highlighted Portland's strong emergency-management coordination and affirmed the City Council's rarely used next-in-line policy for decision-making.

As politicians from the East Coast have learned in recent weeks, nasty weather can bring a treasure-trove of good will or serve up career catastrophe, depending on how government officials respond. New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, for instance, earned praise when he shoveled snow from his neighbors' properties while Mayor Kasim Reed has been hammered for the traffic nightmare that ensued after snowfall in Atlanta.

Things haven't been perfect in Portland. TriMet shut down the Max light-rail system Saturday because of ice. Some business owners complained that the city should have done more to make roads passable.

But as Portland and the region continue to defrost into Monday, city officials haven't reported any weather-related deaths and generally give themselves high marks in Hales' absence.

Commissioner Nick Fish, who has assumed many of Hales' responsibilities such as running a 13-member Disaster Policy Council first convened on Thursday, said it's been smooth.

"To be perfectly honest," Fish said, "I can't think of a decision that has been made in the last four days that would have likely been different had the mayor been here."

Where's the mayor?

Hales left Feb. 2 for a climate-change conference in South Africa and has been vacationing there with his wife, Nancy, since Friday.

The four-day winter storm wasn't the only thing Hales missed: a city-led development deal to bring Trader Joe's to Northeast Portland fell apart Monday and teachers who work for Portland Public Schools held a historic strike vote Wednesday.

This also isn't the only example of a Portland mayor being on vacation at an inopportune time. In 2006, then-Mayor Tom Potter was vacationing in Germany when James Chasse, a mentally ill man, died in police custody. Potter's staff waited five days to tell him about Chasse's death.

Gail Shibley, Hales' chief of staff, said Hales has been in contact throughout the past week with not only herself but also elected officials and other leaders, although she declined to specify how frequently or with whom.

In an email Sunday, Shibley said Hales has been in the loop on weather events and "delegated to me the on-the-ground decisions needed by his office."

Hales' office did not respond when asked if the mayor considered canceling or shortening his vacation because of the weather.

Hales, in a telephone interview with the Portland Tribune on Thursday, spoke highly of the C40 climate conference in Johannesburg.

The event featured speakers such as former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and leaders from Copenhagen and Rome. Hales was among panelists who discussed how smart planning and infrastructure help build livable cities.

"I think we've contributed and we've learned," Hales told the Tribune.

How Portland makes decisions

City officials have learned a lot since December 2008, when a winter storm dumped 19 inches of snow and leaders declared a formal emergency.

Fish recalls friction and uncertainty between city bureaus who hadn't hammered out a coordinated approach.

In the aftermath, the city created a severe weather standard operating policy. That "helped formalize and memorialize what each of the bureaus' roles and responsibilities are," said Carmen Merlo, director of the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management, which prepares the city for emergencies and coordinates responses.

Separately, officials also reduced the number of bureau directors on the city's Disaster Policy Council, which promotes cooperation among bureaus and advises the mayor on emergency responses.

Typically, the mayor leads that group, which includes the city auditor, attorney, chief administrative officer and directors or chiefs for the fire, police, emergency management, water, transportation, sewer and human resources bureaus.

"During an emergency, you can't have 30 advisors," Merlo said. "So we narrowed down the list."

Under city charter, the president of the City Council “shall perform the duties of the mayor” in the mayor’s absence. The president sits on the disaster committee as vice chair, regardless of whether the mayor is in town.

In this case, that’s Fish, but the City Council rotates president responsibilities every six months.

“Having us all rotate through the Disaster Policy Council means any one of us could take over,” said Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who was council president when parts of downtown – including Portland’s administrative offices – lost power in December.

The Disaster Policy Council first convened Thursday at 1 p.m., with Hales calling in. The council held two conference calls Friday without the mayor. Another is expected Sunday night.

Fish said he has spoken with Hales once since Thursday, although Shibley has represented the mayor’s office in the meetings.

Since Fish has been running the disaster meetings, recommendations have been unanimous. Fish said he’s not sure what would happen if, in the mayor’s absence, the City Council president disagreed with a recommendation and wanted to go a different direction.

“Since we’ve made all the decisions on a consensus basis, that hasn’t come up,” he said.

On the ground

Portland’s transportation and water crews have dealt with the brunt of the winter storm.

Water workers have responded to at least four main breaks, including one that flooded streets near Southeast 20th Avenue and Powell Boulevard early Sunday.

As of noon, transportation crews had plowed 518 miles of priority roadways 14 times. More than 300 transportation bureau employees worked 12-hour shifts since the storm struck, with crews also dropping more than 1,000 cubic yards of gravel on roads and spraying about 12,000 gallons of deicer.

The city also for the first time used a Wireless Emergency Alert to urge Portlanders to stay off the roads Sunday. The text went out at 8 a.m. to anyone with an enabled cell phone living or passing through Multnomah County.

The city’s message to stay inside left at least one business owner fuming.

Pat Lanagan, who owns a bar and adult video store in North Portland, complained Sunday that the city hasn’t done enough to clear streets. He said he understands safety concerns but thought the city shouldn’t actively be encouraging people to stay inside.

“I’m just disappointed that we’re paying the price of a lack of management,” he said, adding, “I sure don’t appreciate that from a business perspective.”

Commissioner Steve Novick, who oversees the Bureau of Transportation, defended the city's approach. Novick said it's better to err on the side of caution than to tell people the weather will get better and be wrong, making safety conditions worse on the streets.

"We do not want to be presumptuous in dealing with the weather," he said.

Fish also defended the city's response to the storm, praising Novick and Merlo in particular.

Fish, who visited homeless shelters with firefighters in Hales' absence, said he hoped stories would emerge in coming days about Portlanders who stepped up to help out those in need during the snowstorm.

"I think these kind of events do bring out the best in people," he said.

Portland Commissioner Nick Fish applauds residents for heeding warnings, staying inside as city says 'stay home'

By Andrew Theen

Calling road conditions throughout Portland on Saturday a "a real public safety issue," Commissioner Nick Fish applauded residents for heeding the city's emergent calls to stay home.

"The freezing rain came early," Fish said. "And it's going to stay longer than initially anticipated."

Fish said for the most part, Portlanders are getting the message.

The city took the unusual measure of issuing a blanket emergency alert on Saturday. The message said TriMet was "no longer reliable," after MAX light rail trails were shut down earlier on Saturday. Sidewalks and roads were spotty, too.

Fish said overall, the roads aren't "impossible" but "they're not safe," either.

Saturday's emergency message was the second-highest priority alert the city could send out, according to Fish.

Fish is acting as Council President in the absence of Mayor Charlie Hales, who is in South Africa. Hales flew to South Africa earlier this week for the C40 Mayor's Summit, a global climate change conference. Hales extended his stay in the nation to vacation with his wife Nancy. He's slated to return on Feb. 12.

Since Thursday, Fish said he's spoken directly to Hales "once."

But, he added, Hales' Chief of Staff Gail Shibley has been an active participant in the daily conference calls by the city's Disaster Policy Council.

Fish said he's talked to Shibley "at least once a day," since the storm hit.

Representatives from Portland Fire & Rescue, Water Bureau, and Bureau of Transportation have been collaborating and working with other jurisdictions and utilities to ensure the city is performing its duties, Fish said. He pointed out the city has extra crews working throughout the night.

"I don't remember getting slammed like this since 2008," Hales said, citing another memorable snowstorm.

Fish said Sunday morning will begin with vehicles from several city bureaus and potentially TriMet traveling to hospitals to help dispatched patients get home safely. Portland is partnering with Multnomah County, Fish said.

But the elephant in the room isn't what do roads and services look like on Sunday.

"What will the impact be on Monday's commute," Fish said.

That's the big question.

The Portland Tribune

Police horses relocated from Centennial Mills

by Jim Redden

Structural problems at Centennial Mills has prompted Portland police to move the off-duty home of the Mounted Horse Patrol from there to the Narnia Farms in Aurora, approximately 22 miles away.

The decision was made after the Bureau of General Services and the Portland Development Commission notified the Portland Police Bureau of evolving structural problems the Centennial Mills building, located at 1362 Northwest Naito Parkway.

The unit has been housed inside the building since 2001, and a specific area of concern is the location where the horses are stalled.

"The Mounted Patrol Unit is ever vigilant for the safety of the horses and personnel who work in the building and therefore has decided to move the horses to an offsite location until we can be assured the safety of the building," police said in a Thursday statement.

The unit will continue to operate out of the Centennial Mills location, but the horses will be trailered in each day for work. The bureau is working with PDC to assess the future stability of the location and their plan to address the structural problems and safety concerns.

The PDC acquired the building many years ago with the idea of redeveloping it. Plans have stalled, however, as ideas have changed about the best uses for the property.

The City Council has repeatedly considered eliminating the Mounted Patrol Unit to save money, but the community has always rallied to support it. The unit was established in 1979, and currently has 8 horses, 4 officers, 3 non-sworn staff and 1 sergeant assigned to the unit.

According to the bureau, in an average month, the officers on horses contact about 1,800 citizens, primarily in the downtown core and Old Town areas. In addition to its primary patrol function, the unit is also available to participate in special events and crowd control details throughout the City of Portland.

To learn more about the Mounted Patrol Unit, visit www.portlandoregon.gov/police/article/250328

You can follow the Mounted Patrol Unit on Twitter at @PPBMPU or visit the Facebook page for the Friends of the Mounted Patrol, www.facebook.com/saveportlandsmountedpatrol

Water district qualifies for May ballot

By Jim Redden

Portland voters will decide whether to create an independently elected water and sewer board at the May 11 Primary Election.

City elections officials announced that supporters of the proposed Portland Public Water District had collected enough valid Portland voter signatures to qualify the measure for the ballot. Statistical sampling show the supporters called 32,858 valid signatures on their initiative petitions. Only 29,786 were required.

The petition was filed by former lobbyist Kent Craford and Floy Jones, co-founder of the grassroots Friends of the Reservoirs organization.

Craford says he expects the measure to be a referendum on the council's handling of the Portland Water Bureau and the Bureau of Environmental Services, which operates the city's sewer system and stormwater management programs. Over the past few years, controversies have erupted over some projects pushed by council members. They include the construction of the Water House demonstration project and renovation of the Rose Festival headquarters with water funds under former Commissioner Randy Leonard.

"The Public Water District initiative will be a referendum on Portland City Hall's abuse of power. From spending restricted water funds on pet projects to retaliating against whistleblowers, City Hall's power trip with our water and sewer bills is about to end. Mayor Hales has called ratepayer advocates terrorists; I call us freedom fighters," said Craford.

Jones says she also expects the measure to be a referendum on water and sewer rate increases repeatedly approved by the council in previous years. Newly released budget documents show the water project projects its rates to increase 55 percent over the next five years, while the environmental services bureau expects the rates to increase 21.5 percent during that period. Jones also criticizes Commissioner Nick Fish, who is in charge of both bureaus and up for re-election this year.

"Commissioner Nick Fish has voted to raise water rates 66 percent in the five short years since he was elected. Portland now has higher water rates than Phoenix, Arizona and yet Nick Fish wants to raise rates another 55%. Does Fish think Portland ratepayers are made of money?" asks Jones.

The signature gathering drive was largely funded by a handful of corporations that use a lot of water, including Portland Bottling, Siltronics, and American Property Management, the apartment company owned by developer Joe Weston. According to Craford, they are opposed to the rate hikes that have made Portland's water and sewer services among the costliest in the nation.

The measure has already drawn heated opposition. It includes the council and several environmental groups that fear the district will reduce funding for stormwater management programs operated by the environmental services bureau, among other reasons. They include Portland Audubon and the Oregon Environmental Council. Some public employee unions are also expected to come out against it.

The Portland City Club is expected to release a report on the measure in coming weeks.

After being assigned the water bureau last year, Commissioner Nick Fish took several steps to show it was under new management. He sold the controversial water house and worked with Commissioner Steve Novick on a five-year agreement with the statewide Citizen Utility Board to review and comment on the bureau's budget.

Mayor Charlie Hales also reduced the combined rate increase in the current budget from over 10 to under 5 percent, which the council approved. Fish is likely to propose combined increase of around 5 percent for both bureaus in next year's budget.

Hales shares Portland experiences at international conference in South Africa

By Steve Law

Portland Mayor Charlie Hales rubbed shoulders Thursday with leaders of the world's "megacities," where he shared Portland's experiences in urban planning at the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Most of the cities in the group are much larger than Portland, but Portland is seen as a world leader in the effort to combat climate change, Hales said in a phone interview from Johannesburg.

Hales was a featured speaker Thursday morning in a plenary session on Smart Planning and Infrastructure, appearing alongside the mayors of Mexico City, Milan and Curitiba, the fourth-largest city in Brazil. It was one of six such sessions at the conference.

"I think we've contributed and we've learned," said Hales, speaking for himself and city staff that attended.

Hales said he was inspired by listening to the mayor of Johannesburg speak of the challenges of making environmental gains when there is so much poverty and a wide gap between the haves and have-nots.

"He really makes a powerful case that livability is a path to social equity," Hales said.

Portland's mayor also was intrigued about hearing of a smartphone app used by the mayor of Mexico City, which provides real-time data on air quality and transit ridership.

Hales said he'd like to ask some of Portland's app developers to devise something that might prove useful here, perhaps something that can be used to bolster the number of people using the transit system.

C40 was created by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in partnership with the Clinton Climate Initiative.

The mayors argue that while national governments have been slow to respond to the threat from climate change, much of the world's carbon emissions stem from cities, along with much of the innovation and progress in reducing carbon emissions.