

The Oregonian

Amanda Fritz has a part-time chief of staff, and 'It's working out great'

By Brad Schmidt
July 20, 2015

Portland Commissioner Amanda Fritz's chief of staff is running out of time.

In an exceptional if not unprecedented City Hall work arrangement, Tom Bizeau, the top political aide for Fritz, officially retired last fall but continues to work for her on a part-time basis.

He now keeps an irregular schedule – only recently returning from a six-week absence – in an attempt to collect his government pension without exceeding a state cap for hours worked.

The odd arrangement hints at what will likely be a staffing shakeup for Fritz, who originally planned to leave office at the end of 2016 but decided to seek re-election after the death of her husband. Coupled with the recent departure of one of four senior aides, who took a job in the Bureau of Development Services, Fritz's political staff is undergoing the most significant changes since she took office in 2009.

Bizeau's setup has puzzled City Hall staffers, who privately say the absences are at best an inconvenience and, at worst, leave Fritz vulnerable to communication breakdowns and political surprises – such as Mayor Charlie Hales' July 1 announcement that he would remove the Bureau of Development Services from her portfolio, just hours after she told a reporter such a move would be "unfortunate."

Fritz defends the arrangement with Bizeau, her only chief of staff over 6 ½ years. Fritz said she values Bizeau's skills and wanted to figure out a way to keep him around.

"It's working out great," she said.

Working part time is common among government retirees, and there's nothing improper about the practice. But it's an unusual scenario within a Portland political office, particularly for a position as demanding as chief of staff.

Chiefs of staff are salaried posts known to work long hours. They navigate city politics and serve as trusted advisers to their elected bosses, providing the frank and sometimes-contrary feedback that others won't. Add in their roles as office manager to political staffs, plus administrative oversight of city bureaus, and it's no small task.

Bizeau, 61, is a former Portland planner who in many ways resembles his elected boss – neither have much taste for the requisite politics that come with the job.

A man of few words, Bizeau is known for an elaborate plant collection viewable from his window to City Hall passersby. Most notably, he ran point for Fritz in 2013 on her successful effort requiring businesses to provide paid sick leave to employees.

In an unintended sign of things to come, Bizeau went missing from City Hall later that year as he worked offsite to craft the accompanying sick-leave administrative rules.

Bizeau officially retired Sept. 1, 2014, and collects \$3,361 a month in benefits from the state's Public Employees Retirement System.

As a retiree, he can keep working for Portland while collecting benefits, provided he clocks no more than 1,040 hours during the calendar year – or the equivalent of 20 hours a week.

According to a city personnel form, Bizeau planned to average 20 hours a week and Fritz expected the arrangement to last "until such time as a full time replacement is found."

In practice, Bizeau has kept his hours in check by working nearly full time and then completely detaching.

From Jan. 4 through April 11, he averaged 35 hours a week, a pace that would quickly put him over the yearly cap, according to city records obtained through a public records request.

Then he took two weeks off.

Bizeau returned to the office in late April and worked for five weeks, averaging just 17 hours.

Then he took six more weeks off, returning this month from an absence in which he didn't set an out-of-office message for his phone or email.

By midyear, Bizeau had managed to keep his hours at about 600 – leaving him with roughly the same for the remaining six months.

Fritz downplayed the arrangement as "insider baseball" but acknowledged that it's unusual.

"Since when have I done anything status quo in City Hall?" said Fritz, who won office in 2008 using Portland's now-defunct public campaign finance system and then largely self-funded her 2012 re-election.

Bob Durston – who worked as chief of staff to former Commissioner Erik Sten for 10 years, leaving in 2006 – said he couldn't recall a similar part-time arrangement.

As a top political aide, Durston said he averaged 40 to 50 hours a week. It would be possible, but challenging, to do the job in half the time, he said.

"It might not be an issue for the office," he said. "It might be an issue for exterior partners."

Fritz said she doesn't know whether others inside City Hall know about the arrangement, but said, "It's not really any of their business."

"My staff and I are making it work," she said. Asked whether that means more work for Fritz, already known to put in long hours, she said: "I've always been very involved in how the office runs."

Bizeau, who earned nearly \$112,000 in fiscal 2014, declined an interview request. In an email, he said that he now pays for all of his benefits as a part-time employee and his retirement has already saved the city's general fund \$35,000 in salary.

"I think if you were able to look at my hours over the years, you would see I have often been first in last out on many days," he wrote. "That has changed of course and others in the office are having to take on or let go of many of the issues that previously got my attention."

Tim Crail, a senior policy analyst for Fritz, has served as the interim chief. He is presumed to be Bizeau's eventual replacement, perhaps sometime in the coming months.

Fritz, however, declined to say whether she expects to make changes.

"I don't have a vacancy for chief of staff," she said, "right now."

Deal to unionize 80 seasonal parks workers to cost \$2 million

*By Brad Schmidt
July 17, 2015*

Portland officials and the labor group representing many parks employees announced a deal Friday to unionize about 80 positions at an estimated cost of \$2 million.

The agreement follows a labor grievance and arbitrator's ruling in May that determined Portland hired seasonal employees to perform the work of unionized workers.

Laborers' Local 483 and city leaders reached an agreement to unionize three positions most similar to jobs of existing represented workers -- customer service representative II, preschool teachers and assistant pool managers.

The changes, retroactive to July 1, will cost the city about \$25,000 more per employee for 80 posts -- or \$2 million. Much of the increase is tied to benefits.

Officials will also discuss other classification changes for hundreds of other seasonal parks workers, although none necessarily would carry such costs. For those positions, the city could resolve problems by removing work responsibilities that overlap with union employees.

The City Council will review and vote on the deal July 29.

Thanks to a flush economy, the City Council will likely be able to absorb the higher costs during budget modifications this fall. Otherwise, they could tap into a \$2.2 million general fund contingency.

Daily Journal of Commerce

Design discussions begin for Zidell Yards

*By Beverly Corbell
July 20, 2015*

After five years of planning work, the Portland Development Commission last month approved a development plan for Zidell Yards on the South Waterfront. Now initial design conferences are being scheduled with the city.

Last week, Eric Wilson of SRG Partnership filed paperwork for early design assistance with the city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Initial plans call for two office buildings, on Lots 4 and 6 of the 33-acre property. Kathleen Mozzocco of Clear PR said owner ZRZ Realty selected SRG to work in partnership with Lever Architecture as the design team.

"Both buildings will be office buildings with ground floor retail," she said. "We hope to have more information by early fall."

The Lot 6 building will be 250,000 square feet, Mozzocco said, while the building for Block 4 will be 125,000 square feet. Both will have multiple stories and underground parking.

According to city records, the designers requested a pre-application conference on the simultaneous design and development of the two separate buildings to discuss design review and greenway review.

At last month's PDC meeting, chair Tom Kelly called the development plan "historic" for the city. The plan calls for ZRZ to develop about 1.5 million square feet of "mixed-use, employment-oriented commercial and residential property" in the North Macadam Urban Renewal Area over the next 10 years. The development will eventually lead to use of approximately \$23.7 million in tax increment financing for both public and private development in the URA.

The PDC board has already approved an intergovernmental agreement with the Portland Bureau of Transportation to pay up to \$500,000 for preliminary design of improvements to Southwest Bond Avenue from downtown to the waterfront.

City approves stormwater treatment system

*By Inka Bajandas
July 20, 2015*

The Portland Bureau of Environmental Services has approved the use of an Ohio company's stormwater treatment system to meet city requirements to filter runoff on Portland projects.

A BES staff evaluation and third party review by Portland State University's engineering department determined that West Chester, Ohio-based Contech Engineered Solutions' Filterra bioretention system meets pollution reduction requirements outlined in Portland's Stormwater Management Manual. Approval of the product was finalized earlier this month and will last for three years.

The Filterra system collects runoff through a curb opening that flows into a specially designed planting media mix for filtering the stormwater that is contained in a landscaped concrete container, according to the Contech Engineered Solutions website. Once pollutants have been filtered out of the runoff, it flows into an underdrain system in the bottom of the container where the treated water is discharged.

Manufacturers like Contech can ask BES staff to evaluate stormwater treatment technologies to determine if the products meet city pollution reduction requirements. The city's evaluation process uses criteria established by the Washington State Department of Ecology.

GoLocal PDX

Portland Parks & Rec Receives \$1.5 Million For A New Entrance To Forest Park

*By Robby Davis
July 18, 2015*

The Oregon legislature approved \$1.5 million in funding for Portland Parks and Recreation to create a new, official entrance to the 5,200-acre Forest Park. This entrance will include a nature center, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) accessible trail and a parking lot.

"Forest Park is a world-class urban treasure," said Oregon State Representative Mitch Greenlick. "The city has been a great steward of the Park for 100 years. This project is the centerpiece of the dream for the next 100 years, keeping the Park alive and accessible."

With Legislature officially approving the \$1.5 million, the next phase of the project will include site planning and design. Once that's been completed Portland Parks and Recreation will officially be ready to break ground.

This project is supplemented by \$800,000 in Portland Parks SDC dollars, and not tax dollars. SDCs are one-time fees that are assessed on new development to cover a portion of the cost of providing specific types of public infrastructure as a result of the new development.