

The Oregonian

One exasperating example of Portland's public-information problems: Editorial Agenda 2016

*By The Oregonian Editorial Board
January 17, 2016*

Portland's Bureau of Human Resources comes with its own tagline attached to emails and on its website: "Knowledgeable | Helpful | Responsive." On a recent request for basic information, however, the bureau fell short on all three.

Unfortunately, that's what the public can expect these days from the city of Portland when it comes to seeking public information. For example, the city still has not released a copy of the contract it signed with Nike for funding its bike-share program despite The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board's Jan. 7 request to view it. And just last week, city commissioners dreamed up a hypothetical scenario as a way to justify appealing the Multnomah County district attorney's order that it release legal memos from 25 years ago. Never mind that the hypothetical has nothing to do with the specifics of the case in front of the Council. The universe of potentially-adverse-situations is apparently good cause to stymie a citizen in his legitimate request for information.

But the case involving the Human Resources request offers a snapshot of the byzantine and nonsensical process city bureaus follow for dealing with inquiries from the media and the public.

On Dec. 2, Portland city commissioners authorized a new paid parental leave benefit for city employees, similar to one adopted by Multnomah County for its workers. The policy allows employees up to six weeks of paid leave after the birth, adoption or foster-care placement of a child.

Analysis provided to the Council was relatively thin. But an impact statement submitted with the proposal noted that 185 city employees took parental leave in the fiscal year ending June 30, 2015. They used 5,471 vacation hours, 1,529 of other paid time and 5,719 of unpaid hours as part of their leave. The cost of covering that unpaid time would be about \$217,000.

The statement, however, did not include the amount of paid sick time that city employees used for parental leave. Why is that important? Because it shows that employees are already able to draw on an existing bank of paid time to cover some or most of their parental leave. It helps to show whether there is, or isn't, a clear need for this new benefit, a calculation that should always be part of discussions when you're saddling taxpayers with a permanent new cost to cover.

How much sick time was used by those 185 employees in the fiscal year for parental leave? The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board sought to speak with someone who could answer that question. Instead, the Bureau of Human Resources insisted that the board file a public records request. We did so in a Dec. 9 email that included a request for other data as well. We amended our request on Dec. 15 to focus solely on the amount of sick time used after being told by executive assistant Karen Sorensen that that data was "readily available" and would be given free of charge.

The bureau's answer came just a few hours later. How's that for responsive! Except ... it wasn't what we expected. The bureau sent the total number of hours taken for parental leave – 34,995 – and listed three percentages: 61 percent charged to sick leave; 16 percent charged to vacation leave and 7 percent charged to various other leaves.

Aside from the fact that the percentages did not total 100 percent, (later, we would learn, the remainder was unpaid hours) we explained our interest in getting the actual number of hours, because percentages can be imprecise. After a brief exchange on email, Sorensen said she would follow up after the holidays due to vacations.

On Jan. 6, we got – we thought – what we were looking for. The 34,995 figure was the same. The email listed that 21,346.95 hours were charged to sick time. But then the email indicated that 5,599.20 hours were charged to vacation time. The exact same amount of 5,599.20 hours was marked as unpaid time and another 2,449.65 hours was listed as "other types of leave."

This raised more questions. The amounts given for vacation, unpaid and other hours conflicted with the numbers in the impact statement submitted to the City Council in December. Sorensen apologized, disclosing that she had run the calculations herself, and had not taken into account that the percentages she was using had been rounded – the exact issue we had raised previously.

So on Jan. 8, we got our answer. The exact number of hours of sick time used by the 185 employees for parental leave was 21,312, or nearly three 40-hour weeks per person – a relevant fact that should have informed the debate over whether or how much paid parental leave benefit should be offered.

It's unfair to place all the blame for the errors and time spent chasing down the information on Sorensen, who has been helpful with providing information in the past. Still, a request that could have been handled over the phone in five minutes took instead four weeks, not to mention a certain amount of exasperation. Want public information? Better be ready for a fight. But based on city leaders' behavior recently, that seems to be the message from the top on down.

Make Portland a city that works: Editorial Agenda 2016

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Portlanders have at least two very good reasons for optimism in 2016. The first is an election that will determine who occupies three of City Council's five seats, including, crucially, the one held by lame-duck Mayor Charlie Hales. The second is the likelihood that city residents will vote on a gas tax in May to repair Portland's long-neglected roads.

The prospect of voting on a tax isn't normally a cause for celebration, but consider how the street-funding struggle evolved. Hales and Commissioner Steve Novick, who oversees the city's transportation bureau, proposed a transportation fee in 2014 that was expected to generate \$40 million to \$50 million per year. The proposal was highly controversial and soon flopped. There ensued a protracted period of public brainstorming during which some truly exotic

street-funding proposals were aired, including a local income tax. It took a long time to get to this point, but settling on a gas tax would be a victory for common sense, simplicity and accountability.

Yes, accountability. The tax proposal Novick will bring to Council on Jan. 27 would apply a dime a gallon to gasoline and some diesel, and it would last for only four years. At that point, voters would have to renew it. This deadline will provide a powerful incentive for the city to spend the revenue, about \$16 million per year, responsibly.

Such moments of fiscal sobriety in City Hall would be less notable if they occurred more frequently. The prevailing culture in Portland government, however, is better reflected by City Council's decision in December to create a paid parental leave benefit for city employees. Whatever the legitimate public policy reasons for adding this benefit might be – and we're certainly not suggesting there aren't any – commissioners should ask first whether it's actually needed. After all, city employees, like many public-sector workers, have the ability to use accrued sick time and vacation leave to cover parental leave. But when The Oregonian/OregonLive editorial board asked Portland Human Resources director Anna Kanwit about the cost to taxpayers of the new benefit, she asserted that "the fiscal piece is very narrow and small-minded."

Portland taxpayers should be appalled that anyone in city government considers it small-minded to consider the costs of city programs and policies. But don't blame Kanwit. She could argue that she's simply following the lead set by City Council itself, which has perfected the art of ignoring costs its members find inconvenient. A list of examples would stretch from Portland to Salem, but two from 2015 are worth noting.

The first is Council's decision to revamp the methodology for calculating park-development fees applied to new residential and business space. The subject is wonky, but the change will substantially boost fees on most new development. City Council was happy to ignore that fact even as its members spent much of the year wringing their hands about the rising cost of housing in and around Portland.

The second example is Hales' decision, tacitly endorsed by his colleagues, to chase off Pembina Pipeline Corp., which had proposed to build a half-billion dollar export terminal for propane at the Port of Portland. By making the decision, which was nothing more than environmental posturing, Hales agreed to impose a significant cost on the blue-collar workers who would have built the facility, the small number of people who would have worked there permanently and the thousands of people who would have benefited from the steady stream of property-tax revenue. When it comes to making grand gestures, Hales and his colleagues seem to consider it narrow and small-minded to weigh the costs.

Portland would work much better – and more Portlanders would find decent work – if City Council regularly exhibited the sort of discipline derided in City Hall as small-minded. To change the Council's direction for the better, it will first be necessary to change its leadership for the better. Portlanders should be thrilled, then, by Hales' decision not to seek a second term and for the willingness of two highly qualified candidates – Ted Wheeler and Jules Bailey – to seek his seat.

Among the qualities that will distinguish Wheeler and Bailey in the coming months, voters should pay particular attention to those that indicate a penchant for beneficial small-mindedness and the potential to lead City Council and City Hall in a more responsible and sober

direction. Who, in other words, would be the gas-tax mayor, and who would be the Pembina mayor? Choosing the best candidate will go a long way toward making Portland a city that works better in the coming years, no matter what the final year of Hales' tenure may bring.

The Portland Mercury

A Day Storage Site For the City's Homeless Didn't Arrive Thursday As Planned

By Dirk VanderHart

January 15, 2016

Last week, after some gentle prodding, the City of Portland announced that it'd be opening one of two day storage sites for homeless people this week, months later than planned. We reported that'd be happening.

It hasn't.

The west end of the Steel Bridge has neither the 53-foot modified shipping container officials said was on the way, nor the restrooms and dumpsters they say will create a needed new resource for homeless Portlanders in and around downtown.

"The delivery driver got the flu," says Jen Clodius, a spokesperson for the city's Office of Management and Finance. The new plan? The storage containers are slated to arrive on parks land beneath the Steel Bridge next Tuesday, with the second container delivered to a spot near the Hazelnut Grove homeless camp on North Greeley on Wednesday.

"Mind you those are just deliveries," says Clodius. "There's still set-up work to be done."

As we've noted, the day storage sites will help fill a gap in service for the city's growing homeless population—offering them a place to store their belongings without fear of theft. Those places exist in Portland—for instance, at the Bud Clark Commons in Old Town—but can't possibly keep up with demand. That will almost certainly remain the case even with the planned city operated sites. Cities like San Diego and Vancouver have similar systems.

Portland officials say the storage sites will run for at least six months. People will be able to drop off belongings from 6 to 7:30 am, and pick them up from 4:30 to 6 pm. Belongings that aren't claimed will be kept onsite for three days, before being transferred to another facility.