

The Oregonian

City government's culture of dismiss and deny in the face of criticism: Editorial Agenda 2017

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

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In December, the city [ombudsman's office released a report](#) that should have set off alarms for those running Portland's 911 dispatch center. A technological flaw in how cell phone calls are screened meant that the dispatch center never received the phone numbers for thousands of calls that ended because people hung up or were otherwise disconnected before an operator answered. Dispatchers, according to city policy, are supposed to call those hang-ups back to check if there's an emergency, as [The Oregonian/OregonLive's Jessica Floum reported](#).

But rather than respond with the urgency such findings might prompt, Portland's Bureau of Emergency Communications cast an annoyed eye roll. Managers have sought to discredit the report in both their written response and comments to city commissioners. They have disputed the findings that the 911 center lacked phone number information for [more than 18,000 such "abandoned" calls in 2015](#) - even though those figures came straight from their own data. They've quibbled over meaningless semantic distinctions. And they downplayed the severity of the problem by claiming those calls were inadvertent, a conclusion based more on assumptions than any actual analysis.

This isn't good enough for any city bureau, let alone one tasked with handling life-and-death emergency calls. But the impulse to wave off red flags points to a cultural problem in Portland city government as a whole: When confronted with evidence of mismanagement or flawed processes, bureau leaders immediately resort to a strategy of dismiss, deny and deflect.

For example, consider Portland Housing Bureau director Kurt Creager's recent comments in [a story by The Oregonian/OregonLive's Brad Schmidt](#) on the city's new program to help fund repairs to low-income apartments in East Portland. In seeking city money for the program, housing bureau officials gave city leaders unsubstantiated numbers of how many apartment buildings needed repairs. Worse, their guess kept growing over time. When Schmidt established in short order that the real estimate was less than half the most recent number provided by the housing bureau, Creager told him: "Maybe you have more time than we do."

And consider City Commissioner Amanda Fritz's response to a city audit last year that was [highly critical of the Office of Neighborhood Involvement](#) for inadequate oversight of its grants, a lack of strategic planning and questionable funding decisions. Fritz, who oversaw the office until this year, devoted much of her written comments to praising the office and blaming inadequate funding for shortcomings.

Such defensiveness has no place in an organization that strives for professionalism. Honest assessments, no matter how critical, ultimately help it fulfill its mission.

Unfortunately, the 911 center is showing the same prickly attitude toward Ombudsman Margie Sollinger's December 2016 report that revealed technological flaws in how the 911 center handles cell phone calls. Unlike people who dial 911 from landlines, cell phone callers must

press a number or make a noise to get through a program meant to screen out accidental "pocket dials." Their calls are then placed in a queue for dispatchers to answer.

The problem is that if someone hangs up before talking with someone, their phone information is lost. Dispatchers not only can't call them back, they don't even know someone had called in, Sollinger found.

The center's operations manager, Lisa St. Helen, admitted in an email to Sollinger last year that she didn't previously know of the problem. But there's been little formal acknowledgement of that. Instead, the bureau has been downplaying the findings by assuring them that if there were a widespread problem with the screening system, more people would have complained by now.

There may be truth to that, but it's hard to know. They haven't done any testing of their theory beyond checking how many complaints they've had. While they've changed their recorded messages to alert callers to remain on the line, the main plan is to wait for installation of a new system that they believe may fix the problem. As the ombudsman recommended, city commissioners should insist that 911 managers get their approval before implementing a new system so they can ensure that any screening system works properly.

This is not an academic exercise. The 911 center should remember what prompted Sollinger's inquiry in the first place. In May 2016, a Southeast Portland resident complained that she had dialed the dispatch center to report that her neighbor's house was on fire. She hung up after waiting unsuccessfully for a dispatcher to answer for more than two minutes. No one called her back. Calls from others reporting the fire did get through.

In downplaying Sollinger's report, St. Helen noted to commissioners that "you can't quantify what you don't know." When it comes to public safety, however, that should not be a pass for saying "why bother?"

The Portland Tribune

Sources: Wheeler gets a lesson in what independent means

*By Jim Redden
March 30, 2017*

Addressing the City Club of Portland last Friday, Mayor Ted Wheeler praised the independence of the Independent Police Review process in the City Auditor's Office — and then learned how independent it really is. A few hours later, he placed Police Chief Mike Marshman on paid administrative leave after being notified the IPR had launched an investigation into him.

During his first State of the City speech, Wheeler was asked to respond to accusations that the police overreacted to anti-Trump protests. Wheeler replied that anyone who thinks so should file a complaint with the IPR, and then introduced Auditor Mary Hull Caballero, who was sitting in the audience.

During his talk, Wheeler also reaffirmed that he will conduct a national search for Portland's next police chief, something that took on extra urgency late Friday. Although Wheeler has encouraged Marshman to apply, the investigation can't help his chances, even if he is cleared.

Portland is the problem?

City leaders repeatedly say Portland is a model of how cities can solve the world's problems with innovative policies, from climate change to income inequality. But an intentionally provocative column in last Sunday's New York Times says liberal cities are the problem, not the solution to the woes that ail us, and called Portland a "whiteopia."

The piece by regular columnist Ross Douthat was part of a series on unconventional ideas he has been doing since Donald Trump was elected president. Titled "Break Up the Liberal City," it teed off on a Washington Post column that said cities are making America great again. But, in a familiar-sounding criticism, Douthat said they are only great to people who can afford to live in them — mostly white, college-educated young people with no children.

We "should make like Teddy Roosevelt and try to break them up," wrote Douthat, who proposed scattering colleges and big employers to smaller towns across the country.

Creative writing in Salem

Legislative newsletters are usually wonky and boring, but Oregon state Sen. Dennis Linthicum, R-Bonanza, broke the mold with a March 21 tirade against a series of Oregon Water Resources Board reform bills under consideration by the 2017 Oregon Legislature.

Writing in opposition to the bills, Linthicum warned that if they pass, "All water right holders will find themselves in a swamp-like slough of muddy ground composed of fees, regulatory efforts and exceedingly stiff fines — up to \$500 per day."

Linthicum represents a largely rural south central Oregon district that includes all or parts of Crook, Deschutes, Klamath, Jackson and Lake counties. He also compared the bills to such "socialist policies" as the Square Deal, the New Freedom, the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Frontier, and the Great Society.

Daily Journal of Commerce

\$32M being invested in North and Northeast Portland

By Garrett Andrews

March 30, 2017

The Portland Development Commission is preparing to dispense \$32 million in one-time public financing to minority small businesses, homeowners and community groups in North and Northeast Portland.

The Tax Increment Financing (TIF) dollars will go to four areas – commercial real estate development, business ownership, nonprofit support and homeownership.

The PDC's money allotment outline, called the North/Northeast (Portland) Community Development Initiative Action Plan, was finalized at the end of last year. The commission recently began the process of identifying recipients.

A forum at New Song Community Church to provide information to people interested in pursuing TIF funding was attended by around 150 people. Officials handed out checklists containing questions for potential funding recipients – whether they had ever owned property, whether they're comfortable with risk and what their goals are.

"We're using these brief questionnaires to help people self-identify as candidates for financing to support property improvements, or financing for small business growth through grants or loans to help them improve their assets," PDC spokeswoman Anne Mangan said.

Other PDC outreach efforts will target people who aren't deemed ready for funding, but may qualify for technical assistance from another provider, Mangan said.

"This whole thing is built on community input," she said, "and there are definitely specific numbers of entities that are to benefit by the financing and the programs that get developed."

Contractor and minority activist Maurice Rahming said he plans to recuse himself from bidding for money, and instead sit on the committee that is overseeing implementation.

A recent attempt to manage minority set-asides on city projects, through a plan called a Community Benefits Agreement, was criticized by an independent auditor for creating a situation where conflicts of interests could occur between those allotting money and community groups that receive it.

(The audit report by Washington consultancy Framework Inc. does not state that conflicts of interest occurred during the CBA pilot program.)

Rahming said he'd like the money to go to people who missed out on previous waves of economic prosperity.

"I feel like I've benefited, and other companies have benefited," he said. "So if we're flying at 10,000 feet, there are companies that still haven't left the tarmac. And I'd like to see the money go to them."

A business loan can have a greater impact on a smaller company, Rahming said. For instance, money may enable a firm's move to a permanent location. This can be huge in terms of upward advancement because many startups operate out of a residence.