

The Oregonian

Letters to the Editor

Readers respond: Portland's archaic form of government

By Richard Friedmar
December 21, 2018

All cities but Portland and all but a handful of towns in the United States have abandoned our archaic and ineffective form of government. Making commissioners responsible for their own fiefdoms or bureaus is not working. It is much better to have a city manager type of government where councilors are elected by and responsible to the people in their own districts.

Readers respond: Portland safe without terrorism task force

By James Ofsink
December 21, 2018

Tracy Clark's Dec. 17 letter, "[Hardesty priorities threaten Portland's safety](#)," makes it seem as if the FBI would cease operating in Portland were we to leave the Joint Terrorism Task Force partnership again. That is simply not true. The FBI would continue to operate as normal, as it did from 2005 to 2015 when we were out of the program. One key difference, however, is the Portland Police who currently participate in the program would finally be accountable to the people of Portland again. The reason former Portland police chief and mayor Tom Potter led the charge to leave the task force in 2005 was insufficient oversight of the officers for their superiors to be sure that they were adhering to state and local laws, which in some cases are stronger than federal ones. If the officers are acting like their counterparts in other cities, they may be part of a task force surveilling community groups that provide free vegetarian meals to anyone who is hungry, or collecting information on Black Lives Matter activists, or tracking activities of environmental leaders like Bill McKibben — the FBI has been outed as doing all of these. Our city is better than that.

We can have public safety without creating an ever-present police state. As City Commissioner Amanda Fritz has frequently pointed out, including in her opposition to this task force, gaining public trust starts here at home, and the lack of transparency and culture of seeing Portlanders as the enemy erodes that community trust. Exiting the task force is the right thing to do, and it's exciting to see that with Commissioner-elect Jo Ann Hardesty joining the Council, we may again have the leadership in City Hall to enact bold ideas.

Readers respond: Birmingham's history a lesson to Portland

By Stephen F. Peifer
December 21, 2018

If Portland finally decides to scrap its antiquated commission form of government, it might study the history of Birmingham, Alabama, my hometown. In 1962-63, during the height of the violent civil rights struggle, Birmingham voters woke up and switched from a commission government to a mayor-council form with nine council seats. It made all the difference in the world.

The transition, albeit rough at first, eventually allowed Birmingham to become a modern municipality. Gone were the days of racist, dictatorial rule by Eugene “Bull” Connor, the commissioner of public safety, and his cohorts. Separating legislative and executive functions, electing the expanded council by districts, and holding the mayor directly accountable for city management and implementation of council policy, all led to a more democratic and effective government. It also resulted in better local representation, a racially diverse council and the election of several black mayors in a previously hardcore segregated city.

Portland, of course, isn’t Birmingham, but if a declining and chaotic city could make this simple change 56 years ago, perhaps it’s time the City of Roses gave it a try.

Readers respond: Chaos by design

*By Steve Colburn
December 21, 2018*

We have watched our beloved Portland deteriorate as a livable city and we all see a city government powerless to stop it. While I often don’t agree with Oregonian editorials, their call to upgrade our city-departments-led-by-city-commissioners form of government nails it. (“[Portland’s a big city now. It’s time our City Council caught up](#),” Dec. 16). Employing a trained, knowledgeable and experienced city manager to run things seems like the way Portland can become an efficient city once again — one where we can count on basic services being delivered fairly and smartly to all.

We elect city commissioners for their politics with little regard for their managing skills and experience. Then we put them in charge of multimillion-dollar city departments and wonder why those departments don’t work well or together. We grouse about city departments which see wild swings in direction with each change of “leadership.” But this chaos is a direct result of how we choose to govern ourselves.

Change is difficult. But it is well beyond time for concerned Portlanders of all political stripes to make this big change in our own government. It won’t guarantee good government, but it would at least make it possible. Let’s get behind this effort. And thanks to the City Club for shining a light on this critical issue.

The Portland Tribune

Feds add funds for streetcar expansion to Montgomery Park

*By Zane Sparling
December 21, 2018*

An infusion of federal funds will scoot the Portland Streetcar a bit closer toward its planned Slabtown expansion.

The Federal Transit Administration wrote a check to the city's lighter-than-light-rail network for \$1,076,000, which will be used to study development opportunities along the proposed 2.3-mile loop of new track terminating at Montgomery Park in Northwest Portland.



COURTESY PORTLAND STREETCAR - A map shows the proposed route of the Portland Streetcar expansion to Montgomery Park.

"It's a great opportunity for us to use some federal money and really plus up some of the work that's already ongoing," said Andrew Plambeck, a spokesman for the Portland Streetcar. "There's a ton of redevelopment potential baked in with existing zoning."

The [new line](#) would run north along Northwest 18th and 19th avenues before turning west at York and Wilson streets. The money will help determine if changing zoning to allow for residents over retail can entice developers' dollars, as well as whether the rail lines will impact traffic.

[Montgomery Park](#) — which includes the city's second-largest office building and surface and structured parking spread over 18 acres — is already zoned for mixed use. The now-demolished ESCO steel foundry offers another 24 acres, currently zoned for offices, that are considered ripe for redevelopment (or maybe a [major league diamond](#)).

But traveling the tracks to completion will cost an estimated \$80 million, with some of the money earmarked for purchasing new streetcars and building a maintenance facility.

"This grant award is an acknowledgement that continued investment in Portland Streetcar will allow us to continue to grow while reducing carbon emissions and helping people get where they need to go," said Chris Warner, interim director of the Portland Bureau of Transportation.

Added Commissioner Chloe Eudaly: "As we expand public transit and grow the Central City, we will reduce traffic congestion and provide more opportunities for Portlanders to walk, roll and bike through our public-transit oriented community."

Plambeck says the Montgomery Park expansion could be finished in three years, if state, federal and local partners cough up the dough. The new line would double the frequency of streetcars zipping across the Broadway Bridge to the Rose Quarter and Convention Center.

The [grant money](#), which was formally requested by Metro, will also allow the bureaus of transportation and planning and sustainability to study the Portland Streetcar's next goal: a new terminus at the Hollywood town center.

Potential routes to Northeast Portland include along Broadway and Weidler streets — or taking Irving Street past Benson High School to Sandy Boulevard.

The Portland Mercury

Will Portland's New Unarmed Officers Fix Police Bureau Woes?

*By Alex Zielinski
December 20, 2018*

In the first week of December, Portland City Council unanimously voted to hire a dozen police officers who don't carry guns.

Called "Public Safety Support Specialists" (PS3s for short), this new type of cop will only respond to reports of low-level, non-emergency crimes—the type that have most contributed to Portland's steady uptick in 911 calls. Armed only with pepper spray, PS3s will write up reports about stolen property, help people exchange insurance information after car crashes, attend neighborhood meetings, assist in searching for missing persons, block off roadways when needed, and help inventory evidence and found property—among other tasks that sworn officers often handle. Dressed in green polos emblazoned with a PPB logo and tan khakis, the PS3s will be divvied up between Portland's three precincts. The city is expected to start hiring PS3s in January.

Most agree that PS3s have the potential to improve policing in Portland. But in a city with a shaky history of police accountability, any change at the Portland Police Bureau (PPB) comes with a skeptical pause from the public.

"Where are the people of Portland represented in today's decision?" asked a man identified as John who testified at city council before the vote. "[We've] said we want police reform with transparency and accountability to the community. This proposal provides neither."

City commissioners agree that the city's clunky unveiling of the stalled program didn't help gain public trust.

The idea of a PS3 role was first mentioned in 2016, during the city's tumultuous contract negotiations with the PPB's union, the Portland Police Association (PPA). That contract promised a future chat between both the city and the PPA regarding "the feasibility" of a new unsworn position, which was then called a "Community Service Officer." As with most PPA meetings, those conversations took place behind closed doors.

Aside from Mayor Ted Wheeler quietly tucking \$1,159,293 into the city's 2017-2018 budget to fund a community service officer program (the majority of which [still sits untouched](#)), the concept has largely remained off the public's radar. Then, on Friday, November 30, the city announced it would be voting to approve 12 new police jobs the following week.

Even regular police activists seemed caught off-guard by the vote to approve the PS3 program.

"It is really shameful that there was no real lead up and no community discussion before today," said Portland Copwatch's Dan Handelman, testifying before council before the vote. "If this is about community-engaged policing, well, the community wasn't engaged in defining what they're going to do."

Others raised concerns that the job doesn't focus on improving PPB's response to mental health crises, an issue the bureau is still struggling with six years after being ordered to improve by the US Department of Justice.

But that never was the point of the PS3 program, according to Commissioner Amanda Fritz, who sat on council when the position was first proposed. Fritz said the role was not created to serve as a liaison between police officers and the homeless or the mentally ill.

Wheeler reiterated the limits of the role before he called for the council vote.

"This is not a community engagement or a community policing unit, per se," Wheeler said. "Community policing is a policy that has to be embodied throughout the organization."

The public's hazy understanding of the PS3 program is expected, based on the way Wheeler's discussed it in the past. In [his 2017-2018 budget](#), Wheeler noted the program would be "focused on engaging directly with the community." And in a public list of his 2017 accomplishments, Wheeler said he had "developed a new Community Service Officer program... to enhance community policing efforts."

In the official job description for PS3s, that community-focused mission has been reduced to "assisting sworn officers with community engagement."

More concretely, the PS3 positions do appear to address a problem that both police officers and members of the public have been urging the city to address: Dangerously slow response times to 911 calls.

According to the city budget office, 911 call volume has increased by more than 22 percent in the past five years, with a specific uptick in "low and medium priority" crimes. But the number of police officers hasn't grown, causing an imbalance that earlier this year led Wheeler to expand the force by 58 additional sworn officers. That decision sparked outcry from community members who called for reform before making any new hires and grumbles from PPB and union officials who believed 58 new officers still weren't enough to help an overburdened bureau.

Ideally, the PS3s will address both of these concerns by allowing unarmed non-officers to share sworn officers' heavy workload.

"There's quite a lot of work that's done by sworn members that does not require police authority," said Wheeler before the council vote. "To hire PS3s means... we'll give our officers time to do more than just run from call to call to call. It's a better allocation of our scarce resources."

It's certainly going to be cheaper than hiring more sworn officers. According to the job description, PS3s will start with an annual salary of around \$49,800. (Entry-level salaries for sworn police officers start at \$64,400.) And instead of plodding through sworn officers' mandatory 400 hours of state law enforcement training in Salem, PS3s will only need 200 hours of local training.

PPB Assistant Chief Chris Davis, who will oversee this program, says the job would be a good fit for recent college grads interested in law enforcement, or retired officers who want to stay involved. It won't be easy for PS3s to climb the ladder into a sworn position, however. The PS3 contract notes that any hours accrued by PS3 officers won't roll over to a sworn position and despite their history with the bureau, every PS3 will enter a sworn position with entry-level pay.

Portland joins dozens of other jurisdictions across the country that have introduced this type of low-level policing position into the traditional law-enforcement system. The roles vary slightly by city—in Seattle, community service officers mediate disputes between neighbors and

investigate child abuse, while those in Beaverton focus on parking enforcement. A Stanford University [study of community service officers](#) in California found that 94 percent of them did administrative and clerical work. It's not clear what Portland's PS3s will spend most of their time doing—yet.

The city has requested a review of the PS3 program in one year. Davis says the best way to measure the efficacy of the program will be reviewing which officers are responding to calls. If sworn officers end up taking fewer calls for low-level crimes than they are now, that will be an easy sign of success, says Davis. But it probably won't be that simple.

“I have to manage expectations with this program,” Davis says. “It's entirely possible that we'll come back after a year and find out that we've used PS3s a lot, but that the load on officers hasn't gone down... because the overall number of calls is going up and up and up.”