

New boat will give the city a more nimble, centrally located response to river rescues

By [Mark Larabee, The Oregonian](#)

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Portland will get a new high-speed fire rescue boat geared for nighttime emergencies, filling a void that was long known but not publicly exposed until May, when a woman was arrested and accused of throwing her two young children off the Sellwood Bridge.

The response that night was inadequate, said Commissioner Randy Leonard, who oversees the Fire Bureau.

"As I listened to the 9-1-1 tapes, I could hear the little girl screaming, 'Don't, Mommy, don't,'" Leonard said Wednesday. "We never want to have circumstances that would allow something like this to happen again."

The City Council voted 4-1 to approve the boat, which will be staffed full time next to the Hawthorne Bridge on the east bank of the Willamette River. Fire trucks from Sellwood arrived on the scene immediately, but the two children, a 4-year-old boy and his 7-year-old sister, were invisible in the cold, dark river. The boy eventually died, while his sister was pulled from the water by residents who heard her screams.

Dispatchers sent the lumbering 87-foot David Campbell, the Fire Bureau's 1927 fire boat, from its berth at Station 6 along the city's northern industrial waterway. It took 42 minutes to arrive.

The new 30-foot aluminum boat will cost about \$367,000 and will go 40 mph. It will include "forward-looking infrared radar," which can see warm bodies floating in the water at night. The council approved spending \$200,000 from the current budget and will get the rest of the money from next year's budget. The boat will be delivered in about eight months.

Commissioner Dan Saltzman voted against the purchase. He said the city's general fund is tapped, and that the council shouldn't dip into reserves "based on an emotional reaction to one incident." He suggested the money should come from a 1998 bond measure that the Fire Bureau is using for seismic upgrades to several fire stations.

Fire Chief John Klum said the bond money is already earmarked. He also noted that firefighters have rescued six people on the Willamette River near downtown since the Sellwood Bridge incident.

But Saltzman suggested that Leonard and Klum had not made enough of a statistical case to justify the expense.

"To me one death is too many," an angry Leonard fired back. "This is an insignificant amount of money for the benefit that Portland citizens will get,"

Leonard declined a suggestion by Commissioner Amanda Fritz to delay the vote a week to explore the fire bond funds. She supported the measure anyway.

Mayor Sam Adams also supported the expense, saying more people are in and near the water as the city has grown and reshaped its riverbanks to make them more accessible.

The Fire Bureau has a similar boat in operation, which is moored at Hayden Island on the Columbia River. Another Station 6 fire boat, the George Williams, is faster than the Campbell, but was out of service for repairs on the night in question.

The Multnomah County Sheriff's Office has three boats on the Willamette near Station 6, and all go 35 to 40 mph. They were off-duty the night of the incident. Because of budget cuts, the sheriff's

boats don't operate around-the-clock and they also patrol the Columbia and Sandy rivers and could be hours from downtown.

The Fire Bureau will staff the boat with the city's one-of-a-kind rescue team, Squad 1, which will be stationed full-time at the Hawthorne Bridge station. They respond to calls all over the city and are highly trained for trench, cliff and water rescues.

Hiring new firefighters would have cost about \$1 million a year, Leonard said, but the Fire Bureau didn't have the money to add anyone in a tight budget year.

-- [Mark Larabee](#)