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Does Portland's Water Supply really Need Armed Guards?

BY BETH SLOVIC



IMAGE: Hawk Krall

Commissioner Randy Leonard wants 19 Water Bureau security guards to have the power to carry guns and arrest would-be evildoers, including "terrorists."

The idea is to protect Portland's drinking water, pipes and storage facilities from vandalism and other attacks—without needing to wait for backup from police.

The proposal—which Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who manages the Police Bureau, calls "totally unnecessary"—requires approval from a majority of the five-member City Council. That could come as soon as Oct. 21.

If it's approved, the ordinance would clear the way for Water Bureau guards to become state-commissioned "peace officers"—an umbrella term for police officers and other public safety officials who are authorized to carry guns.

"It's something we've been discussing for a long time," says Leonard's chief of staff, Ty Kovatch. "We have a water system that is probably the city's single greatest asset."

It's not just the guns that matter. Unlike security guards, Oregon peace officers have the power to seek warrants and make arrests. "They are key in stopping any terrorist attack at any point on the entire region's drinking water system," Leonard wrote in an email about the proposal.

Water Bureau director David Shaff says this "authority to act" would allow the bureau's 19 security guards and two supervisors to arrest people who vandalize the city's drinking-water infrastructure. It would also let them bust trespassers such as the two swimmers who climbed security fences in June 2008, then jumped into the Mount Tabor Reservoir.

Police arrested the man and woman after Water Bureau security guards spotted them, then charged the pair with misdemeanor criminal trespass and violating park curfew. The charges were dismissed after the two performed community service.

If the Water Bureau had had the power to arrest people, it could have saved time by arresting the pair without police, Shaff says.

And if Leonard gets his way, Water Bureau guards wouldn't be the only city employees, other than cops, with guns. A handful of arson investigators with Portland's Fire Rescue Bureau are also commissioned peace officers with weapons.

Additionally, public safety officers at Oregon Health Science University have state authority starting Jan. 1 to become "university police." The new designation will let them make arrests and seek warrants, though OHSU has decided they won't carry firearms. The two animal cruelty investigators with the Oregon Humane Society are peace officers, too. They don't carry guns, but they do have Tasers. (Security officers at Portland State University are commissioned by the state but are not full police officers, nor are they armed.)

While nobody has determined how much this change might cost Portland, Saltzman is concerned about a potential budget impact. There would be equipment costs. And the new duties would be the subject of collective bargaining with the security guards' union, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 189.

Oregon's Department of Public Safety Standards and Training would cover the cost of sending 21 Water Bureau employees to its 16-week training course, Shaff says. That training—and, therefore, the cost—would be spread over several years, Kovatch says.

No other water bureau in Oregon has similar authority, says Eriks Gabliks of the state safety standards and training department. Seattle Public Utilities, the agency that oversees that city's drinking water, has no such arrangement. But the North Jersey District Water Supply Commission in Wanaque, N.J., has armed security.

Saltzman remains unconvinced about the need to give the Water Bureau gun-

toting authority. "I'm not sure what's broken," he says about the current system. "It just sounds like we're asking for trouble."

FACT: Leonard took control of the Water Bureau from Saltzman in 2005 after then-Mayor Tom Potter reassigned it to him.

Originally Published on

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