

Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard wants armed water officers

By [Janie Har, The Oregonian](#)

October 15, 2009, 10:50AM



Ivan Kashinsky/The Oregonian

Officers train at the Portland Police Bureau's Advanced Academy in 2005.

Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard wants Water Bureau employees who patrol the city's water supply, to be able to carry guns and make arrests. Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard wants to deputize a portion of his Water Bureau, giving guns and arresting powers to the people who protect Portland's drinking water.

And the idea, to almost no one's surprise, isn't faring well with the other people in charge of overseeing official firearm use in the city.

A puzzled Dan Saltzman, the commissioner in charge of the Police Bureau, called Leonard's plan unnecessary and confusing. Police Chief Rosie Sizer said creating another police unit would be "extreme" and "Herculean" in effort.

Leonard, phoning in from Palm Springs on Wednesday, where he was attending a public safety pension conference, said he doesn't understand the fuss. Portland's water reservoirs are open, police response time varied and his people need backup to protect a valuable public resource, he said.

In fact, he found his idea so obvious that he planned to stick his proposed ordinance on the City Council's consent calendar for next week, he said. Commissioners vote on consent agenda items as a group without debate.

"I didn't think it was an item that council wanted to take time to discuss. It struck me as more of an administrative" matter, Leonard said.

Currently, the 19 security officers and two administrators in the Water Bureau are authorized to patrol reservoirs and call police for help. Leonard's ordinance would create a law enforcement unit within the bureau whose members would undergo basic training through the Oregon Department of

Public Safety Standards and Training.

Leonard said he has been talking about this for four years, ever since he took control of the bureau in 2005. With the city seeking permission from the federal government to keep its reservoirs open, he said he's promised that armed officers patrol the city's drinking water.

The bureau needs a way to handle trespassers, fire-building campers as well as terrorists capable of harming the city's water supply, said David Shaff, Leonard's water administrator.

Last summer, Shaff said, someone threw a bucket of paint into a reservoir at Mount Tabor. A couple of people were caught hunting in the Bull Run watershed.

"People do stupid things and I want my folks to have the ability to take action," he said.

But creating more peace officers isn't as simple as that. Portland's Fire Bureau has several arson investigators with police authority, but the crossover isn't common.

In Oregon, TriMet contracts with police to watch its stations. Oregon State University and the University of Oregon contract with state and local police for armed officers.

Chief Sizer said the trend nationally has been to consolidate police bureaus.

"It would be unusual for a city to commission two different police departments," Sizer said. "I think there are alternatives that are more efficient and effective that I'm not sure have been explored."

Saltzman said he doesn't believe Portland's water system needs armed protection, but if it did, he would lobby for a contract with the police or private security.

The city had a contract with private armed guards when he oversaw the Water Bureau before Leonard took over. Leonard ended the practice after he took over the bureau.

"One of the things I've learned as police commissioner is you don't want an armed officer without backup," Saltzman said. "That's just asking for trouble."

This is the latest scuffle between Leonard and Saltzman: Saltzman opposed Leonard last summer on water treatment methods and last week on a new rescue boat for the Fire Bureau.

Saltzman said Leonard didn't tell him about his guns-for-officers plan. Leonard said he finds it hard to believe that Saltzman would prefer giving firearms to contract security rather than to city workers.

"I'm not even going to respond to that," Leonard said. "That's just absurd."

-- [Janie Har](#)