

Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard says Chasse death 'inexcusable'

By [Mark Larabee, The Oregonian](#)

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Jamie Marquez, Courtesy of The Portland Mercury

James Chasse Jr. is pictured cuffed face down on the sidewalk. Chasse died later by broad-based, blunt force trauma to his chest, as ruled by the state medical examiner. Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard said Thursday he can no longer hide his feelings about police handling of the James Chasse case just because the city is facing a federal lawsuit in the death.

"That has nothing to do with justice, worrying about legal positioning when a man like Mr. Chasse is dead," Leonard said. "If the Police Bureau caused Mr. Chasse's death and the county denied him medical care, we should pay his family and we shouldn't have to have a judge tell us to do it."

Chasse, 42, died of massive internal injuries in police custody after he was chased down for urinating in public. The death in 2006 triggered a cascade of public outrage and criticism of how police treated the mentally ill man.

During a City Council meeting Wednesday, Leonard called Chasse's death inexcusable. He said the Police Bureau's three-year internal investigation, which eventually cleared all but one officer, should have taken 90 days.

Then Thursday, Leonard said he should have stood up before now. "If I, as a city commissioner, view an injustice, I should speak out about the rightness and the wrongness of people under my control," he said.

Leonard's comments come after recent public disagreements with City Commissioner Dan Saltzman, who oversees the Police Bureau. While the remarks expose a simmering rift between the two leaders, they also put the city and police in an uncomfortable position in the lawsuit filed by

Chasse's family.

Mayor Sam Adams declined to address Leonard's statements. He said he supports an independent review of the case by City Auditor LaVonne Griffin-Valade, who plans to hire an outside expert to evaluate the quality of the police investigation.

"I am waiting for that before I draw my own conclusions," Adams said.

Multnomah County settled its part of the lawsuit this past summer for \$925,000, but the city's part of the case is set for trial in March. The suit accuses officers of excessive force and the police and paramedics of failing to provide adequate medical attention.

Two Portland officers -- Officer Christopher Humphreys and Sgt. Kyle Nice -- and then-Multnomah County sheriff's Deputy Bret Burton, who is now a Portland officer, arrested Chasse after he appeared to be urinating in the street. Chasse ran, the officers chased him, knocked him to the ground and struggled to handcuff him.

An autopsy showed Chasse suffered 26 breaks to 16 ribs, some of which punctured his left lung; 46 separate abrasions or contusions on his body, including six to the head; and 19 strikes to the torso.

Medics at the scene said his vital signs were normal and he was taken to jail. But jail staff members refused to book him because of his physical condition. He died while being taken to the hospital in a police car.

In the internal investigation, Police Chief Rosie Sizer found that Nice violated bureau policy when he failed to have Chasse taken to the hospital as required for certain people once they've been stunned by a Taser.

Leonard and the Police Bureau have long been at odds. Last year, he clashed with Sizer when she said she wouldn't work for him if he got the job overseeing the bureau. Adams then had Saltzman become police commissioner.

Now, Leonard and Saltzman are squabbling. Saltzman won't back Leonard's desire to train Water Bureau security guards as police officers and give them guns and Saltzman voted last week against Leonard's proposal to buy a new high-speed rescue boat for the Portland Fire Bureau.

Then Wednesday, the two again disagreed during a council debate over releasing the names of people arrested by the city's special force of police officers who go after drug dealers and chronic drug users. Saltzman wanted to keep the list secret, but Leonard pushed for its release and the rest of the council backed him.

Saltzman has suggested alternatives to armed water guards: using existing police, contracting with another police agency such as the Sheriff's Office or perhaps creating an interagency task force, much like the collaborative effort among metro area police to patrol MAX trains.

"We don't need more guns in Portland parks," Saltzman said. "We don't need another Chasse case in the city parks."

Overall, he said, he and Leonard agree more often than they disagree. He's just doing the job he was elected to do, he said.

"Commissioners have the right to ask questions on any policy matters," Saltzman said. "I'm sorry that certain people take offense at that."

Leonard will delay a council discussion on the Water Bureau security guards for two weeks to look at alternatives.

-- [Mark Larabee](#)