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Randy Leonard's Chasse rant draws raves from lawyers who sue cops.

BY JAMES PITKIN



BREAKING RANKS: Criticisms by Randy Leonard (left) of how police handled James Chasse (right) may complicate the city defense of a suit filed by Chasse's family.

IMAGE: Randy Leonard photo by Craig Mitchelldyer

City Commissioner Randy Leonard will make a star witness if the lawsuit over the 2006 death of James Chasse Jr. in police custody goes to trial this March as scheduled.

But he probably won't be testifying for the city in its defense against the lawsuit filed by Chasse's family. Not after Leonard made remarks at a City Council meeting last week—captured on video—that Chasse's death from massive blunt force trauma was “completely unjustifiable and inexcusable.”

Leonard's statement Oct. 21 was remarkable coming from a high-ranking city official in a case that has inflamed public opinion and widened rifts between cops and the community.

And it went against what city commissioners have said was the advice of the City Attorney's Office, perhaps weakening the city's position in avoiding a potentially staggering payout to the Chasse family in its lawsuit seeking unspecified damages. Multnomah County settled its smaller piece of the suit last July for \$925,000.

The Chasse family's attorney, Tom Steenson, declined to comment on Leonard's remarks. But other prominent cop-suing lawyers in town who are not involved with the case say they wouldn't hesitate to employ Leonard's remarks against the city in court.

“I would absolutely use it every way I possibly could,” says lawyer Steven Sherlag. “Kudos to Randy Leonard for speaking the truth.”

“I would show the video in [my] opening statement,” says lawyer Greg Kafoury. “I would thank Mr. Leonard for his honesty and his courage in not hiding behind attorneys or bureaucrats and for not knuckling under to the power of the police union.”

Leonard says he isn't worried about hurting the city's case.

“I'm elected by the citizens of Portland to do the right thing, not try to win court cases in incidents involving the death of Portland citizens,” Leonard says. “My first obligation above all is to represent the citizens of Portland, and underneath that umbrella includes financially protecting them but also protecting their civil rights and making sure they are safe.”

Leonard's remarks came after a series of public disputes with Commissioner Dan Saltzman, assigned by Mayor Sam Adams to oversee the Police Bureau. Most recently, Saltzman spoke up against Leonard's effort to arm Water Bureau security with guns and provide them with police training. On Tuesday, Saltzman proposed giving those guards less-lethal options like pepper spray or Tasers.

Leonard denies his remarks on Chasse were meant to pressure Saltzman politically. Instead, he says a number of factors prompted him to speak out more than three years after Chasse's death.

First was Police Chief Rosie Sizer's announcement in September that the officers' use of force in arresting Chasse was justified under police policy. Leonard says he held off speaking publicly until after the findings were complete.

Leonard says with the Chasse case, the Police Bureau “continues an almost insane set of circumstances wherein it makes it inevitable Portlanders are going to be seriously hurt or killed.” Sizer's office declined to comment.

Then came what Leonard describes as a private conversation in which Saltzman insisted on speaking out publicly about issues Saltzman is concerned about. Leonard says he's taking the same tack now with the Chasse case. Saltzman's office declined to comment.

“This is not about a power struggle,” Leonard says. “What it is about is Dan's increasingly personal attacks of me at Council, on whatever the issue is.”

The dispute takes its place atop a growing pile of Leonard's public disagreements with fellow politicians. But his Chasse

statement shocked even seasoned City Hall veterans.

Charlie Makinney, a liaison to the Police Bureau under former mayors Vera Katz and Tom Potter when both mayors managed the bureau, says Leonard's behavior would never have been tolerated by Katz.

"She never, that I know of, threatened consequences to another commissioner for a stand they were taking. But I think commissioners assumed they were not going to make her happy," Makinney says. "Sam should have that kind of discussion with Randy."

Leonard confirms he discussed the situation with Adams, who chose last year not to manage the bureau and who has counted on Leonard's support during his own tumultuous first year.

"Sam is a very thoughtful, contemplative guy, and listened to what I said, and nodded that he understood," Leonard says. "He respects that, and I appreciate that about Sam."

FACT: *Saltzman helped Leonard's political career in 1993, when Saltzman was the deciding vote on the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners to appoint Leonard to fill a vacancy in the state Senate.*

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