

# The Oregonian

## The Monday Profile: He stirs it up, serves it unfiltered

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Randy Leonard can't seem to help himself.

He opens his mouth, and things come out. Funny things. Outlandish things. Offensive things.

Like earlier this month, when an innocuous question from a radio host led Leonard to urge a ban on taping off spots to watch the Grand Floral Parade. Along the way, he insulted thousands with his waxing about pinkie-ring-wearing suburbanites with Washington license plates speeding their Hummers into town to steal prime viewing territory from helpless little old ladies.

"I don't regret it," Leonard said last week, "although maybe I should have left out the part about the Washington plates."

There is a method to his mouthiness. In this case, Leonard's comments led to major media coverage, a Portland Mercury-led movement to rip up tape the night before the parade and the promise of a city committee to study the practice. The brouhaha also added to Leonard's reputation as City Hall's resident lightning rod, the guy who always has something to say.

What makes Leonard go off so often? Maybe it's his rough-and-tumble upbringing. Most definitely, it's a keen eye for political theater. Savvy political observers expect to see more displays from Leonard in coming months as he prepares for a 2008 re-election campaign.

"He's sort of a master politician," said Frank Dixon, a Northwest Portland neighborhood activist who ran against him in 2004. "He's got an uncanny sense of how to get into the public eye."

Leonard, 54, grew up in inner Northeast Portland, the son of a merchant marine gone much of the time and a stay-at-home mom who, he's said, turned abusive when she drank. This was back before Irvington gentrified. After school, he and his buddies would watch "Superman" and then gather for a game called "playing the dozens," a round-robin of insults.

"You were the most feared person if you were able to verbally disassemble your opponent, hopefully leaving him a puddle of tears," he said, cackling. "It was the best."

He graduated from Grant High School, taking a break for a monthlong stint in the U.S. Marine Corps that ended when he tore ligaments in an ankle and eagerly came home, and then to Portland State. He thought about going to law school but scored poorly on the law boards. Instead, he joined the Portland Fire Bureau in 1978.

The macho, uncensored environment of the firehouse turned out to be a perfect fit. By 1985, Leonard's colleagues elected him the youngest fire union boss in city history. His political career took off from there.

On the City Council, Leonard has carved a niche as the blue-collar voice of Portland's geographic fringes. He used to ride a Harley-Davidson, he takes his RV on campaign trips and makes St. Patrick's Day a big deal in City Hall. He keeps a larger-than-life photo of local blues legend Curtis Salgado in his office and boasts that he's the only city commissioner who lives east of 82nd Avenue.

During the past two years, he's accused Mayor Tom Potter of trying a "power grab" in his effort to change the city's form of government, called for a criminal investigation of Portland General Electric and suggested that Portland Development Commission managers were trying to bilk taxpayers in favor of developers.

When negotiations over the cost of the new aerial tram broke down, he threatened to rent a tow truck and pull out the first pilings. When Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler asked the city to pay for continued pickup of dead animals and running a sobering station, Leonard said Wheeler was trying "emotional blackmail."

It's all, he says with his tongue planted only slightly against his cheek, part of his ongoing campaign to "get the foot of the man off the throat of the people."

Still, there's an element of political artistry in his carefully crafted superpopulist persona, right down to the blue jeans he wears on the job and his skill with a sound bite. This, after all, is the same guy who suggested outlawing trans fats in Portland, banning smoking in city parks and taxing cell phone calls. Leonard can frequently be spotted leaving the office wearing a bike helmet, tank top and black spandex bike shorts, high-tech mountain bike in tow.

His pit-bull build and bite, in other words, hide the tree-hugging, peace-loving heart of a traditional Portland liberal. He's just less concerned about being nice than his colleagues on the City Council.

"A lot of people appreciate someone who doesn't filter what they're saying," said pollster Mike Riley. "That's part of his appeal: He says things. Some are dumb, some are smart, but they're always exactly what he thinks."

At various points in the past two years, aides in other City Council offices have alternated between cursing his name and rolling their eyes at any mention of him. They note, with a mix of envy and irritation, his tendency to hire friends and pay his aides better than anyone else in City Hall, regardless of their experience.

Bureaucrats who've felt his wrath -- the PDC and the Parks Bureau are frequent targets, and the first thing he did upon taking over the Water Bureau and the Bureau of Development Services was shuffle upper management -- live in irked fear.

Tucked among the hundreds of e-mails he received after his comments this month were a number from people questioning why he would spend his time on duct tape and bring the issue up days before the parade.

There was the woman who compared him to Jesse Jackson -- "If there is controversy and a chance to get on TV or be in the newspapers, out you come with some misguided or off-the-wall statements" -- and the blogger who suggested that "we run him out of town on a rail."

"I have been a strong supporter of yours," wrote another constituent. "However, the last several years, I have grown to be annoyed by you more and more."

Leonard's response was typical: "Have you been talking to my wife?"

He, at least, selects issues that resonate -- thus the headlines. A lot of Portlanders agree with him. Most calls and e-mails to his office on the duct-tape issue were positive. Last month, Portland voters overwhelmingly gave the City Council budget authority over the Portland Development Commission, one of his pet causes, and rejected the mayor's call to change the form of city government, which Leonard loudly opposed.

His biodiesel initiative -- starting July 1, Portland gas stations will be required to sell a mix of ethanol and biodiesel -- has generated statewide acclaim. It also illustrates how Leonard's tendency to spout off sometimes overshadows the fact that he knows plenty about the legislative process.

He understood, for example, that oil companies would try to block any attempt to force the sale of alternative fuels. So he built a statewide coalition of environmentalists and farmers, not always the most comfortable political bedfellows, by framing the issue as an economic one. Portland's new requirements, Leonard says, create a new market for farmers in the eastern part of the state.

Rather than rush out with a proposal, his aides have worked behind the scenes for months with retailers, police and neighborhood leaders on his next big fight: graffiti. He

wants to make it harder to buy spray paint, and wants to raise the fines and increase city enforcement.

"I don't consider myself outspoken," he said. "I think I'm just talking common sense."

To her surprise, Bonny McKnight agrees. Three years ago, McKnight was one of six neighborhood activists who launched cooperative, kamikaze campaigns against Leonard in the May primary. They accused him, among other things, of catering to developers and creating a culture of fear within his bureaus.

Today, however, McKnight says Leonard has learned the lessons of that campaign and changed how he approaches his job. He's going out of his way, she says, to involve neighborhood activists and is siding with neighbors on issues such as the Parks Bureau's aborted attempts to sell an offshoot of Mount Tabor Park to Warner Pacific College.

"He's become something of an example of what I think most people want their commissioners to do: Focus on running the city, not on big and lavish brand new initiatives, but on the basics," she said. "If anything, I think he's mellowed."

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