

Q & A with Randy Leonard

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L.E. BASKOW / PORTLAND TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

At least city Commissioner Randy Leonard (right, chatting with state Sen. Jason Atkinson, R-Jacksonville, during a Salem visit) didn't tell any Italian waiters that he was a ciambella della gelatina – a jelly doughnut.

Every Friday, the Portland Tribune puts questions to a prominent — or not so prominent — local person.

It's not that Randy Leonard takes his work as city commissioner lightly. But nearly every City Council session, his aides say, they'll hear this muffled cackling sound and look over and there will be Leonard finding humor where others dare not tread.

"I constantly find things humorous that others don't," Leonard explains. "I hear myself laughing and nobody else is even smiling."

The cackling sound, he says, is simply an effort to exert some self-control so he doesn't burst out loud with guffaws.

We figured that behavior alone qualifies Leonard for a Q & A. We also figured he could stand the heat, seeing as how he spent 25 years with the Portland Fire Bureau before being elected to the City Council.

Portland Tribune: You've just returned from a three-week trip to Italy. What, Eastern Oregon isn't good enough for you?

Randy Leonard: My wife wanted to explore small Italian villages. After we got home I said the next small village we travel to is going to be called Burns, because we can actually communicate with the people in the restaurants and they won't interpret me as asking if I could have an affair with their dog.

I took my Rick Steves book and oftentimes could get through a request, but inevitably whoever I was communicating with would answer something back and I would have no clue. I would nod and say back, "Si."

Tribune: Do you think the same policy would work well at City Council?

Leonard: Unfortunately, they would be gratified to have me nod and say yes.

Tribune: So let's address the crucial issue of the day. You came out against duct-taping the sidewalk before Rose Festival parade — what was that all about?

Leonard: It was fascinating. I started getting e-mails saying: "Thank you for saying this because I stopped going to the parade." This was (about) more than boorish behavior.

I've done a number of controversial things that have generated e-mails, but add up all the other e-mails together and they're a fraction of the e-mails I got on duct tape on the sidewalk.

The conclusion I came to is it's this phenomenon a number of us experience all the time that we never really talk about. You're standing in the grocery line and you've got three items, and somebody has a full basket in front of you and they're standing with their hands clasped. And the clerk says, "That will be ninety-eight dollars and seventeen cents."

The person reaches into their wallet or purse and starts fanning their money, pulls out coupons, and you're standing there wondering, "Why didn't you have your money out?" It's irritating.

I spent a lot of time thinking about how this generated not just interest but passion. I think it was an accumulation of frustrations. Maybe it was this powerlessness people found around them.

Tribune: Yes, but who's the best-looking member of the City Council?

Leonard: Sam (Adams), no question. But Mayor Potter is the John Travolta of City Hall. He's got perfect hair. He's cool. You look at his rating, it doesn't matter what he says or does, he's popular. I've heard he's a fantastic dancer.

Tribune: So which movie star are you?

Leonard: Jack Nicholson in "The Shining."

Tribune: A favorite firefighter memory?

Leonard: I have a picture buried away of myself giving mouth-to-mouth to a dog. This tiny dog was in a fire and had quit breathing. The picture that this firefighter took was just as the dog awoke. He took a bite out of me, which is really symbolic of my whole life.

Tribune: The City Council is known for its "anybody can testify" policy. Do you have a favorite testifier?

Leonard: Irwin and Lily Mandel. The very first time Lily Mandel testified she sounded like somebody who lives on the east side of New York. Very much a privileged kind of presentation.

I had been on the council two months, and they were outraged the city had given a permit to the 75th anniversary Harley-Davidson tour. They came to testify on the outrageousness of allowing motorcycle gangs to congregate in the South Park Blocks underneath their condo.

She leaned forward into the microphone — and these folks are artists at testifying, she's got a big floppy hat and a perfect outfit — and she said, "I want you all to imagine this — big boobs, alcohol and loud motorcycles." And then she stopped and I leaned forward and said, "And what is the date of this gathering?" And they wouldn't speak to me for a year after that.

— *Peter Korn*