



Leonard for City Council

He's put his pugnacity to good use.

Friday, April 25, 2008

City Commissioner Randy Leonard has the Point A to Point B mentality of the firefighter he used to be. But in Portland, process often trumps geometry. The shortest distance between two points can be a circle -- of stakeholders holding exhaustive meetings.

Laugh if you like, but the endpoint is often C, a consensus.

In 2004, for instance, Leonard's sensible plan to open neighborhood service centers provoked a veritable cabal of protesters, including neighborhoods leaders who ran against him. This backlash may have embarrassed Leonard, but it wasn't terribly productive. Even working together, they were unable to force Leonard into a runoff.

Still, they quashed the service center idea. And Leonard now says that going the long way around and building support slowly might have been smarter.

In the May primary, Leonard has three opponents, but none is mounting the caliber of campaign necessary to oust an incumbent. That may say something about his service, or perceived strength, or about the fact that there are two other open council races. It doesn't necessarily mean he's mellowed.

Leonard has a bordering-on-browbeating style of quizzing people, carried over from his days as a labor negotiator and legislator. This can be uncomfortable to watch. Also, when he's wrong, he's stubbornly wrong -- as in his refusal to vote to finish the tram or his hammering on the city's beleaguered urban renewal agency.

But let the record show that Leonard also cast the sole vote against launching the city's botched experiment in taxpayer-financed election campaigns. An old-fashioned pol, he apparently had a hunch about where that one was headed.

At any given moment, how you view Leonard depends on how eager you are to move from Point A to Point B. And also, whether you or your pal is the person he's interrogating.

Leonard has been a demanding boss at the city's bureaus of Water, Development Services and Emergency Communications, all once considered problem departments. His high expectations have produced collateral benefits throughout the city in challenging sinecures, coziness and complacency.

Of all the commissioners, he gets the most credit for inspiring -- or should we say provoking -- a higher level of customer service at City Hall. On balance, in ultra-polite Portland, his pugnacity has been much more of a plus than a minus.