

The Oregonian

When it's not an emergency . . .

When you want something done at City Hall, it doesn't hurt to have an ex-firefighter standing by

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When Portland City Commissioner Randy Leonard bears down hard on someone at a City Council meeting, you feel something akin to vicarious chills. You sort of want to hear what happens next, but you also want to shrink down in your chair and hide.

Leonard, a former firefighter, may have missed his true calling as a prosecutor. When he aims a nozzle of ferocious interrogation at witnesses, they often look ready to duck and roll or maybe just evacuate the building.

This ability to put people on the spot can be unnerving when there's no true emergency at hand, and there almost never is during a council meeting. But citizens got a good reminder this week that this ability can also work in their favor. See, sometimes there really is a fire, and the situation calls for putting someone in the hot seat.

Last June in Gresham, for instance, a building was in flames, and an off-duty firefighter called 9-1-1 to report it. But he only got a recording; he was placed on hold for 1 minute and 44 seconds. That's a long time when you're climbing a stair in a place that's on fire, preparing to rescue whoever needs rescuing. Hero you're willing to be, but it would be nice to get some instant reassurance that backup is headed your way.

Leonard, the city commissioner in charge of the city-county Bureau of Emergency Communications, was not pleased to hear how the firefighter's call was handled. And he was even less pleased to learn this was no single aberration but more of a systematic problem. Portland's policy has been to finish one call and go on to the next, even if the first caller isn't actually reporting an emergency.

And even if the second call -- for all anyone knows -- is from a burning building.

Leonard also wasn't happy to learn that surrounding counties have figured out how to triage calls more effectively and more quickly. Why couldn't Portland figure it out, too? Leonard pledged to address the problem. And, as The Oregonian's Aimee Green reported this week, he will soon deliver on that promise.

Ultimately, he's intrigued by the idea of setting up a non-emergency, or 3-1-1, line. It gives people a place to make complaints that do need attention, even though they aren't life-threatening. These lines also save money by diverting calls from 9-1-1 lines.

Beginning soon, though, the bureau's 9-1-1 operators will put callers who don't have true emergencies on hold while screening the next call. In the long term, this change could be lifesaving. In the short term, it may mean that 9-1-1 operators don't sound as polite as usual.

The operators shouldn't use it as an excuse to amp up the rudeness, though. This is still Oregon. There's still room for a little politeness, even when a house is on fire.