

# The Oregonian

*Speakers speak up, but council's unmoved*

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They raised the specter of Nazi Germany, recalled wars fought to protect the First Amendment and appealed to common decency, but the regulars who show up to testify week after week at Portland City Council meetings failed Wednesday to persuade Mayor Tom Potter and his colleagues not to limit how frequently any one person can speak.

The City Council offers five, three-minute slots for public comment at the start of each weekly meeting. But the mayor says a few frequent fliers have dominated the time, freezing out people with legitimate needs and wasting City Council time on irrelevant topics.

His solution: Limit talkers to one appearance a month.

"First and foremost, the business of the City Council is to conduct the business of this city," the mayor said. "This time has been abused by a few people, and it hasn't been used by enough."

Opponents accused Potter of trying to limit free speech of Portland residents.

"My stepfather was an artillery sergeant in the second world war, and he was mentioning once about a politician who had a better idea about free speech," said Paul Phillips, who frequently testifies about his medical problems. "His name was Adolf Hitler."

Said Bruce Broussard, a former City Council candidate who has signed up repeatedly in recent months to talk about school funding and the plight of Portland Public Schools custodians: "As a Marine, I get very upset when I see the flag being burned. But I have to accept that. It's free speech."

Auditor Gary Blackmer's office organizes the weekly public comment session, and he says they've had to turn people away. But Commissioner Sam Adams and his staff analyzed a year's worth of agendas and rarely found a backlog.

Calling the proposed limitation "unfair," Adams suggested several compromises, including awarding spots based on a lottery when more than five people want to speak.

None of his colleagues liked that idea.

"Well, maybe you want to reserve time in your office," snapped Commissioner Randy Leonard, adding that the behavior of certain regular speakers "embarrasses this city."

"There are those who come here who think their rights come first," Leonard said. "There are people that have been threatening elected officials, who have had restraining orders taken out against them, who come here time and time again to fill up the slots and talk about things that have nothing to do with city business."

Although Adams suggested that the change would make Portland's public communications law one of the most restrictive on the West Coast, Potter noted that he's not proposing eliminating citizen input entirely.

Many of the people who pack the City Council agenda, he suggested, would be better served by taking their gripes, questions and suggestions to other government agencies.

The mayor asked Broussard, for example, whether he'd ever spoken before the Portland Public School board about the custodian issue or his school funding thoughts. Broussard told him the school board's public testimony comes at the end of each meeting, meaning "you might have to wait until 10 or 11 p.m." "Thank you," the mayor said, the slightest smile on his face. "You've answered my question."

A final vote on public comment change comes Aug. 16.

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To sign up to speak to the Portland City Council, call the city clerk at 503-823-4086. The City Council meets at 9:30 a.m. each Wednesday at Portland City Hall, 1221 S.W. Fourth Ave.