

Potter is right on disability reform

The council should back the mayor and wait for a real fix for the Fire and Police Disability and Retirement system C

Wednesday, August 17, 2005

ity Commissioner Randy Leonard has become known for his quick reflexes, presumably honed in his firefighting days. But when smoke began pouring out of Portland's Fire and Police Disability and Retirement system earlier this summer, and sirens were figuratively sounding all around him, Leonard at first stood back and seemed to take no notice.

Leonard -- a beneficiary, former trustee and key shaper of the disability and pension system -- had previously told The Oregonian, "If every bureau in the city ran as well as (the FPD&R fund), we'd be a very well-run city.

"They take caring for taxpayer dollars very seriously."

Now, however, it seems that Leonard has recovered his sense of urgency. Taxpayers should be delighted that this former union leader, uniquely positioned to influence the city's firefighters and police officers, has decided to champion reform of the system. But Leonard is wrong about when the first and easiest reforms should go to the ballot.

Leonard is urging the City Council to send a preliminary package of charter reforms to voters in November. Mayor Tom Potter thinks it would be smarter to wait until next year, analyze the issues more carefully and ask voters to make deeper changes. Potter is right.

True, moving forward immediately would capitalize on voters' disgust with the badly broken disability system, described earlier this summer by The Oregonian's Maxine Bernstein and Brent Walth. But delay allows time for a citizen panel, commissioned by the council, to wrap up its recommendations. That panel, as The Oregonian's Anna Griffin reported Tuesday, has already spent nearly \$200,000 hiring experts to analyze the system. The designers of reform should benefit fully from this expertise.

Given the complexity of the system, there's a danger that easy fixes made relatively quickly will undermine support for bigger, tougher changes. Unfortunately, a November election would give some people an excuse to do a little and then stop.

At least through 2006 and perhaps beyond, Portland city commissioners will have a choice to make: They can be the heroes of reform or they can try to duck and roll. This isn't going away.

Resolving the problems in the system won't require just hustle; it will take stamina and determination. Until the FPD&R system is fixed, no doubt there will be many points needing a hand from an ex-firefighter -- especially one who is always drawn to a burning issue.