

People have a lot of complaints in Seattle

SEATTLE — Listening to people gripe eight hours a day, five days a week takes a special kind of person.

Michelle White, one of four complaint investigators at the city's information-and-complaints center, says it's something of a calling.

But at least staff at the Citizens Service Bureau are able to help many callers. This year, for example, a big concern is potholes. The bureau refers callers to the city Transportation Department.

Some callers are in desperate straits — about to lose their utilities, or in need of emergency housing for the night. They are directed to city agencies that can help.

Some demand to speak to Mayor Norm Rice personally.

And some callers have complaints no one can help with.

Like the woman who wanted the city to stop the fungus coming through her roof to eat her furniture, or those who believe strangers sneak into their homes at night to raid their refrigerators.

"Maybe because it rains so much here, people are inside, thinking too much," suggested complaint investigator Sue Coble.

"I once had an FBI agent call us who said they arrested a guy who had the bureau number in his pants pocket, recalled complaint investigator Bruce Stotler.

"The FBI wanted to know why our phone number was on the guy. I said: 'Who knows? Even crooks have complaints.'"

The bureau, established in 1965, operates in a windowless office on the first floor of the Municipal Building. Wittman and her four investigators are aided by two operators who provide directory assistance for city government.

The calls cover a wide range of issues. On a recent day, a man called for help when his son bought a car in his name without his knowledge or consent. Another caller wondered who to call about junk a neighbor had put on his property. Yet another was concerned about a huge boulder that the caller thought was ready to fall from the edge of a roadway.

This winter brought a flood of calls about mudslides. This spring, there's been a spate of pro-and anti-calls about whether to

stranger

THAN FICTION

build new sports stadiums.

When a disturbed man wielding a sword tied up traffic downtown for 11 hours earlier this year, about 70 people called, most wondering why police didn't throw a net over the man or otherwise incapacitate him.

Some city residents try to enlist the bureau in their personal vendettas.

"Sometimes neighbors will be out to get someone and they'll turn in neighbors for parking more than 24 hours in one spot," Wittman said.

"I got a call from a person out of state once who was organizing a convention at the Convention Center," recalled investigator Cynthia Phillips.

"All the people going to the conference were driving here from out of state, and they told the organizer they didn't want to come if they're going to get parking tickets."

When skydiving starts to make more sense

MIAMI — Clinging to a wing and waiting to be told to jump, skydiving student Carol O'Connell watched in horror as the pilot struggled with the controls and the little plane began to stall.

With 22 jumps under her belt, O'Connell was left with two choices: leap from the out-of-control and possibly overloaded plane or hang on and hope the pilot would recover. She jumped.

As she parachuted slowly to the ground, she could see the Cessna 210 with six colleagues trapped inside as it corkscrewed into a field of sweet potatoes and burst into flames Sunday afternoon. Everyone aboard was killed.

"I'm very grateful to be alive," O'Connell, 43, told the *Sun-Sentinel* of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "I can't explain why I'm still alive while these other people have left behind many loved ones."

"I guess when it's your time to go, you go. It wasn't my time."

Investigators were looking into whether the single-engine plane was carrying too much weight, with seven people and skydiving

gear aboard an aircraft designed for six.

O'Connell was on a small platform attached to the right side of the plane, awaiting instructions from the jump master as the plane climbed. She was supposed to jump at 3,500 feet, but then the left wing dipped and the plane began to shake.

"The engine seemed fine," O'Connell told the newspaper. "One of the last things I saw was the pilot struggling to handle the plane."

She jumped, and the plane spiraled crazily into the field a few seconds later. She landed moments after that, 80 feet away from the flaming wreckage.

Dan Poynter, author of six technical books on sky diving, told the *Sun-Sentinel* that the others probably couldn't escape because the plane's rotation as it spun toward Earth would have held them down.

"These people were pinned down against the fuselage because of the centrifugal force," he said. "They're on the floor, and they have 25 pounds of gear on their back. It's difficult to get out."

Math not requirement for district attorney

TORRANCE, Calif. — One bullet kills a drug dealer. Two men are charged with murder. Which one is the shooter?

It was John Patrick Winkelman, the prosecutor told one jury. And it was Stephen Edmond Davis, he told a separate jury at their joint trial.

Both men were convicted of murder, just an hour apart, and each faces the possibility of a life sentence.

Defense attorneys accused prosecutor Todd D. Rubenstein of misconduct. Rubenstein denies any wrongdoing. A hearing is scheduled for Wednesday.

"When you've got one bullet in a guy, you cannot argue that two different guys fired that bullet," said Winkelman's lawyer, Peter Giannini. "That's wrong."

Not so, said Rubenstein, who insists he simply argued "logical inferences that can be drawn from the evidence."

The case stems from the Oct. 29, 1995, shooting death of Willie Yen, who was described by authorities as a drug dealer.

Davis and Winkelman, both 19 at the time, wanted to rob Yen,

prosecutors alleged.

Superior Court Judge Francis J. Hourigan allowed the two separate juries because Davis spoke to police while Winkelman did not.

Davis told investigators that Winkelman fired the fatal shot. According to a police report, Davis said he approached Yen from behind and did fire his gun, but did not fire the fatal bullet.

In closing arguments before Winkelman's jury, Rubenstein noted that a witness also reported seeing Winkelman shoot Yen.

"The evidence is manifest," Rubenstein added. "It's unrefuted that John Winkelman is the actual killer."

A day later, Rubenstein told the Davis jury that the evidence was "quite clear" that Davis was the killer, basing his argument on the fact that Yen was shot in the back.

"That is 100 percent consistent with Stephen Davis firing that fatal round," Rubenstein said.

And despite the convictions, it's still not clear who fired the fatal shot.

"You've got just one bullet," said Southwestern University law professor Robert Pugsley. "It just doesn't add up."

Videocamera catches thief taking tampons

CORVALLIS — A trap that nabbed a man stealing from a tampon vending machine in a ladies' room at Hewlett Packard Co. caused concerns among employees that there might be videocameras inside company restrooms.

The rumors began circulating last week after a hallway videocamera caught a man walking out of a ladies' room.

Security officials rigged the tampon machine so that if it were tampered with, the camera would record the person as he or she exited the ladies' room, Foster said.

The trap was set after about \$4,000 in dimes and quarters and \$875 worth of tampons and maxi pads had been stolen since January.

Last Tuesday, HP investigators notified police their trap had worked.

The man was caught on video and the tampon dispenser had been emptied of \$1.75. The man initially denied the theft, but confessed when he saw the videotape. However, he denied having been involved in prior thefts.



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