

local news

Intimidating firefighter fired

The president of the Portland Firefighters Association thinks the decision to oust Harder is "political correctness gone mad"

by Inga Sorensen

Oregon state Sen. Randy Leonard (D-Portland), a likely co-sponsor of a statewide gay and lesbian civil rights bill, continues to maintain that a Portland firefighter who was convicted of a bias crime was unjustly dismissed from his job. Leonard—who is also president of the Portland Firefighters Association, the union which represents firefighters—says he believes the dismissal was prompted by a Portland city commissioner's concern about the lesbian and gay community's supposed political clout.

"I do think that [Portland City Commissioner Charlie Hales] was more concerned with political expediency and appeasing the [sexual minority] community than he was with justice," says Leonard, a first-term legislator who was endorsed by Right To Privacy, an Oregon gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization. "The dismissal was totally unwarranted."

Leonard is talking about the Portland Fire Bureau's decision last month to dismiss Jim Patrick Harder, a 17-year bureau veteran who reportedly called a state legislator and her female companion "fucking bitches" and "cunts" and was later convicted of intimidating the women because he perceived them to be lesbians.

hicle.... Mr. Harder seemed focused on his perception that the victims lived a homosexual lifestyle." The district attorney's office brought additional charges against Harder including the intimidation charge, which is a bias crime because Harder acted on his perception of the women's sexual orientation.

Harder, who declined to comment, ultimately pleaded no contest to the intimidation charge and was sentenced to two years probation, 10 days in the Polk County Jail, 100 hours of community service, and anger-management therapy.

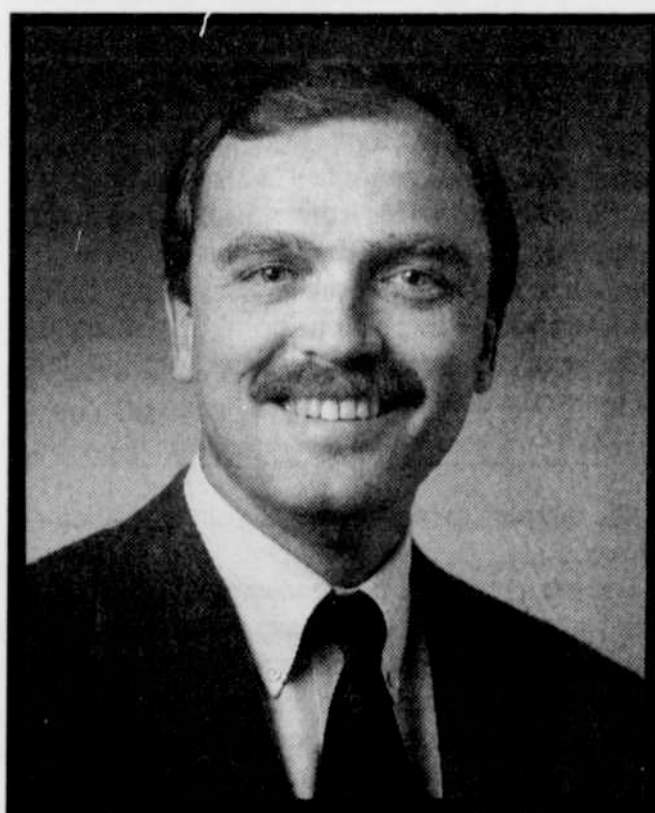
Following Harder's conviction, the Portland Fire Bureau launched its own investigation into the incident, and, in January, Chief Robert Wall recommended the firefighter be dismissed.

"The fact is, you can't have firefighters out there whom you can't trust," says Charlie Hales, who oversees the Portland Fire Bureau. "I support the chief's decision and I am sure that our firefighters do, as well. This was a very serious situation."

Leonard has made several public remarks that firefighters' morale has been shattered by Harder's dismissal—a dismissal he claims had little to do with justice and more to do with "political correctness gone mad."

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—Randy Leonard



Harder, 42, was convicted Dec. 8 of intimidating then-state Rep. Hedy Rijken and Danetta Wilke, Rijken's partner of four years. (See the Jan. 6, 1995, issue of *Just Out* for a more detailed account.) The incident took place Sept. 6 on Oregon's Highway 18 in Polk County. According to the Polk County District Attorney's office, Harder mistakenly thought the women's custom license plates referred to a lesbian and gay rights bill, and he began tailgating them.

When both vehicles were forced to stop for road construction, Harder got out of his car, began shouting obscenities at the couple, and banged on their vehicle's window. Police arrived at the scene and charged Harder with disorderly conduct. According to police reports, Harder told law enforcement officials the women were lesbians "and that he knew [this because] of their appearance and the special plate on their ve-

"What Jim did was wrong, there's no doubt about it," says Leonard. "He should not have shouted at the women or hit their window. What I am saying, though, is that Jim's behavior had nothing to do with him thinking the women were lesbians. This was a driving incident that escalated into something more, and I think both parties played a role in that happening.... Jim should not have lost his job."

He adds, "I'm totally in support of gay rights legislation. I think that's very important. I also support the intimidation statute. It's a good law, and that's why I don't want to see Hedy and Dani abusing it."

Rijken and Wilke were unavailable for comment.

According to Leonard, Harder's firing will now go to arbitration under the firefighter's contract.

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