

# CHIEF CONCERNS

Mark Kroeker's anti-gay comments stun the community by Jonathan Kipp

Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker is in hot water.

Although the city still is reeling from his now-infamous tapes, people are snapping out of it and beginning to step forward and speak. And almost all of them, supporters or not, want to hear from Kroeker.

For many, the shock and confusion—and even doubt and skepticism—slowly have been replaced by hurt feelings, anger and disgust. Still, some are coming out in support of Kroeker without demanding an explanation.

In any case, the timing couldn't have been worse. Amid the Oregon Citizens Alliance's Measure 9, the Boy Scouts of America's gay ban and Dr. Laura Schlessinger's biology lessons, some are wondering whether homophobia is the last permissible and socially acceptable prejudice.

If Kroeker's tapes were about Blacks, Jews, Latinos or women, would there be any question about his continued ability to serve as police chief?

## THE TAPES

Kroeker's troubles started when the *Portland Alliance* called a press conference Oct. 27 and released cassettes discovered during an investigation into his past. Editor Dave Mazza also published portions of the transcripts in the alternative newspaper's November edition.

## KROEKER'S COMMENTS

"You say you can't legislate morality? You know what's happening. Millions of people are going to die in the future in the AIDS epidemic because we decided that the legislation of certain kinds of morality was not the affair of the state."

"We are increasingly becoming a valueless, a lawless society, and we've become so more as we move to that day 'alternative lifestyle' is being used for certain forms of perversion. And I have to tell you there is an alternative death style which is breeding through our major cities."

"We Christians, we are not a social force, we're not a special interest group, we don't need to come up with dictates about whether homosexuals should be administered into the ministry. We don't need to do that. We have God's word for the qualifications for the ministry. That's what we ought to be holding up."

"People and Christians are saying, yeah that sounds right, whatever you do in the privacy of your home is OK. And even if you withdraw the biblical principles you know which are quite clear, for example, on this terrible issue of homosexuality, the other clear evidences in our society show that, as we have moved away from control of certain criminal activities, the result has a disaster, a disaster."

The recordings were made when Kroeker addressed the Fellowship of Christian Police Officers some years back while working for the Los Angeles Police Department. Mazza purchased the tapes off an Internet site located in the United Kingdom. On one tape, "The New Social Disorder," Kroeker makes disparaging comments about homosexuals, calling them perverse, and people with AIDS, blaming the epidemic on a failed effort to legislate morality.

The media widely are reporting the tapes are 11 years old, but Kroeker said he doesn't recall exactly when he made the speech and guessed it was during the early 1990s. He has continued making speeches to the fellowship since the recordings—one as recent as 1998 during its international conference.

Since the tapes were discovered, they have been taken off some Internet sites at Kroeker's request. Other sites still offer the tapes for sale.

## OUTREACH EFFORTS

The *Portland Alliance* exposé came as a surprise to many within the sexual minorities community, the majority of which previously had been impressed with Kroeker's outreach efforts. He was the guest speaker during an Aug. 14 meeting of the Portland Area Business Association, the gay chamber of commerce. He competed against the Rose City Softball Association's all-star team during its annual Grudge Match on June 17. He even marched in the Pride 2000 parade June 18.

But Kroeker's 10-month tenure also has been plagued with controversy. He began enforcing an unpopular paramilitary dress code for his officers July 1. He admitted mistakes were made during the police's aggressive response to the May Day demonstrations and marches. And groups continue to bombard the bureau with accusations of racial profiling and police brutality.

Most dissent has come not from the sexual minorities community but from radical students, activists and anarchists.

When the story hit the mainstream media, Kroeker and his boss, Portland Mayor Vera Katz, were both out of town, and the press was left without comments from either. Although the *Oregonian* initially downplayed the story, waiting for a comment from the chief, some of Portland's television and radio news programs aired the details as a lead story just hours after the tapes became public.

Days later, Katz, who is on a long-delayed vacation after her treatment for breast cancer, did release a statement via telephone. She said Kroeker's remarks concern her but do not reflect her personal beliefs. Katz said she would make additional comments after meeting with him Nov. 6 upon her return.

"It is definitely on the radar screen," said Elise Marshall, deputy chief of staff at the mayor's office. She said that the public's response to the tapes has been significant and that most messages are not in support of Kroeker.

## THE CHIEF'S RESPONSE

The bureau released Kroeker's highly anticipated statement in response to the tapes Oct. 30. He railed on Mazza for not contacting him before the excerpts were published. "I



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

*"I do not want to be evasive. I do want to put my religious beliefs in a place of privacy."*  
—Portland Police Chief Mark Kroeker

believe this to be unfair and find it most disturbing," Kroeker wrote.

Mazza, whose newspaper has a history of criticizing and challenging the bureau, said he didn't contact the chief because his calls often don't get returned. He thought Portlanders should take the information and make their decisions without Kroeker's reaction.

The chief's statement went on to defend his right to a private religious life: "It comes down to a matter of rights, responsibility and accountability. I will rigorously defend my right to speech and my right to my religion and all its doctrines."

Kroeker's comments infuriated some while confusing others. Some wondered why he didn't retract his statements on the tape.

Others found his statement to be arrogant and representative of a "disconnect" between Kroeker and the community. None questioned his right to free speech and to his own personal and religious beliefs.

But they wonder whether Kroeker now able to lead. After all, the bureau is built on a community policing model; he was hired to build coalitions, including one with Portland's minority communities.

Kroeker said he always serves all people in a way that adheres to the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics; the values of the bureau, including integrity, compassion, excellence and respect; and the laws of Oregon and Portland. But he said he has the right to compartmentalize his life.

## KROEKER TALKS

And compartmentalize he did.

In an interview with *Just Out*, Kroeker declined to comment on whether he thought homosexuals were "morally corrupt," which is the stance of many ultraconservative Christian groups, including the OCA. In fact, he said he wasn't familiar with the OCA.

"I do not want to be evasive," Kroeker said. "I do want to put my religious beliefs in a place of privacy."

Kroeker reiterated many times that it was never appropriate to talk about his personal views and religious convictions at work. But the *Willamette Week* reported that at least one of his supporters said he has a history of doing just that.

"He doesn't hide the fact that he's a Christian," retired LAPD Lt. David Smith said. "He talks to the guys and talks about how he thinks people ought to live."

## NO REGRETS

Kroeker indicated he does not have a problem with gays and lesbians, but he refrained from retracting the statements in the tapes.

"I've built affection and warmth," he said about the sexual minorities community. "I have it. I have it in my heart. In the past 10 years I've developed an agenda of love. My words now aren't nearly as important as what I've done in my life."

Still, Kroeker declined an offer to make an apology. He said people should look at his record in working side by side with members of the gay and lesbian community. "Things in a religious context should be left there," he said.

## CIVIL RIGHTS

Some say the issue isn't religion but civil rights. "I'd like to hear him recontextualize his comments," said Jaime Balboa, Basic Rights Oregon executive director.

City Commissioner Dan Saltzman said he was disappointed to learn of Kroeker's remarks. Although he recognizes the chief might have had the time and opportunity to change views about homosexuality, he questions how someone in that position can separate private opinion from public service. Saltzman said he expects he will filter and process the police force's actions differently knowing Kroeker's feelings.

Multnomah County Chair Bev Stein said the chief needs to assure the community that he'll be fair to all people. But she said he must explain where he stands today. "I am concerned when a prominent person isn't a strong advocate for basic rights for all people," Stein said.

County Commissioner Diane Linn, another longtime supporter of the gays and lesbians, hopes that Kroeker will have some honest dialogue with the community and that people will be convinced he can continue in his position without his beliefs affecting his job. "The community has to be concerned," she said. "It begs the question about discrimination."

## A MORAL DISEASE

Kroeker's comments about AIDS were particularly troublesome for some. But when pressed on the issue, he said: "AIDS is not a gay disease. AIDS is AIDS."

Kroeker said he's held that belief for a long time but could not explain why he equated AIDS with morality during his speech almost 10 years ago.