

# Parks bureau to create new rangers to patrol public parks

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Portland Parks and Recreation's contract for downtown security services is coming up for renewal. And with the season's change is in the air.

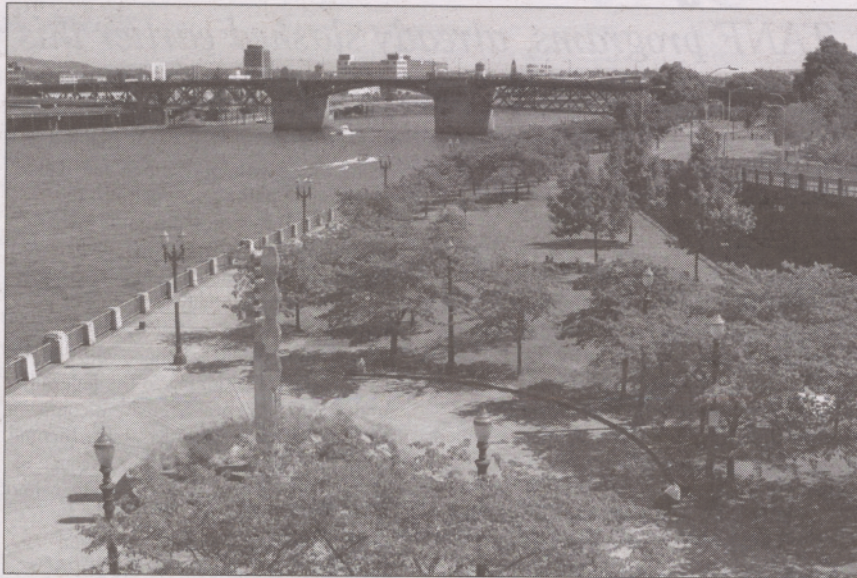
Currently, a subsidiary of the Portland Business Alliance holds the \$530,000 contract with the parks bureau for downtown security services. The PBA then contracts through the private security firm, Portland Patrol Inc., or PPI, for actual patrols.

Under this arrangement, 38 armed and 22 unarmed PPI guards patrol Portland's Business Improvement District, 213 square blocks of downtown. Guards in the district operate between the hours of 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. and 6 p.m. on weekends in the district. PPI guards also patrol 12 parks in the downtown as well as the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade as part of the current contract with the parks bureau.

The arrangement has drawn controversy from police oversight advocates. The security firm's officers dress like police officers and have some enforcement powers, including the ability to issue park warning and exclusions. But they aren't held accountable through the city the same way as a police officer or any city employee. Instead, they answer to a private entity not subjected to the same laws of transparency as government. The arrangement has been criticized for placing so much authority in private hands with so little public oversight.

But that could change, at least to a degree. The parks bureau wants to create three new full-time park ranger positions, a \$200,000 per year endeavor. If the positions are approved by City Council, the new park rangers would provide daytime security in the downtown parks while also performing other duties.

According to Jim Blackwood, policy director for City Parks Commissioner Nick Fish, the new rangers are being created to provide a "more holistic" approach to park services. He said that in addition to security services, the rangers will be there to answer questions that park visitors might have about local ecology and history, give directions, and explain park rules. They'll also be on the lookout for maintenance issues, said Blackwood.



Waterfront Park is among numerous downtown parks that will see a new face of enforcement with the creation of three new park ranger positions within the city. The daytime patrols will replace those currently done by a private security firm.

"It gives us an opportunity to have an integration with other services," Blackwood said of the new positions. "People have a different perception of rangers."

Blackwood said that the new arrangement isn't a response to any shortcomings with PPI.

According to Portland Business Alliance spokesperson Megan Doern, the Alliance will seek to renew the contract and didn't comment on some of the services it currently provides that will be taken over by the city.

As proposed, the park rangers will be active between 7 a.m. through 6 p.m. and will focus on 16 parks in downtown Portland and the inner east side, according to PP&R Spokesperson Mark Ross. The parks department already has one full-time park ranger in Forest Park, as well as seasonal rangers that are hired mostly in the summer, Ross said.

Private officers will continue to patrol the downtown parks from 6 p.m. to midnight, and additional patrols will be contracted through a service provider between 4 p.m. and midnight during the summer months.

The city isn't now in the process of soliciting proposals for the private patrol services.

Commissioner Fish said there has been a lot of confusion surrounding the proposal, which he said he hopes to clear up with a series of meetings with stakeholders, including neighborhood, advocates and business representatives. The time table for the transition will be a function of those ongoing discussions," Fish said.

"The bureau looked at the limited dollars they had for park security and they have long felt they needed more full time rangers, and the shift had a lot of merits for many reasons," Fish said, adding that the basic concerns are costs, control and security.

"We think we will get more coverage and better security within our downtown parks if we move to more full-time rangers," Fish said.

Dan Handelman, spokesperson for Portland Copwatch, said this is arrangement is a step in the right direction, but is still imperfect. Like other advocates, including Street Roots, he's taken issue with a private entity having so much authority and the lack of public oversight.

"They are taking away people's freedoms," said Handelman of PPI officers' power to issue exclusions to park users. "And that's a lot of power."

Last year, park rangers issued 278 exclusions and 571 warnings, according to Ross. Portland Patrol Inc., which current provide security for the parks, issued 984 exclusions in the downtown parks last year, along with 64 warnings. Exclusions prohibit people from returning to a park for between 30 to 120 days or more, and often involve people who are homeless.

If someone wants to contest their exclusion they can take it up with the city's Code Hearings Office, the rangers' supervisor and the parks commissioner, according to Ross. They can also complain to the city ombudsman.

Ross stressed that parks bureau wants the park rangers to have a positive presence in downtown. Each ranger will be certified by the Oregon Department of Public Safety and Standards and will treat people who are homeless just like any other park patron, according to Ross. He also said that park rangers will have training from nonprofit organization JOIN on how to interact with homeless populations.

"PP&R Rangers have also assisted the Portland Housing Bureau and homeless advocates on the street count each year," Ross said, referencing the annual event that seeks to get a picture of the amount of homeless people in Portland. "When encountering homeless people; rangers will often make and facilitate referrals to area homeless providers. ... Staff has met with the Portland Housing Bureau to discuss more intensive training for the rangers when they are hired. PP&R staff has already been working with JOIN and other social services agencies, so this is an issue for which Portland Parks and Recreation staff are prepared and educated."

However, Handelman said there should be even more accountability for the park rangers calling for an independent citizen board to provide oversight.

"You need more than one bureaucrat making decisions," said Handelman. "The parks bureau has an interest in defending their employees."

## CORRECTIONS

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