

The other corner office

Some of the best examples of how to run a city aren't coming from the commissioners themselves, but from the analysis by City Auditor LaVonne Griffin-Valade

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LaVonne Griffin-Valade doesn't mince her words. Nor would she. As a former elementary school teacher and aspiring fiction writer, she values the precision of perfect grammar. As the city's auditor, she values the ability of a well-written, researched — and sometimes, snappy-sounding — report to change, in some way, how the city functions.

As auditor, Griffin-Valade is in charge of overseeing how the auditor's office investigates and conducts reviews of the functionality of various city programs—everything from the city's streetcars to entire bureaus, to the stability of the city's finances. She became the city's auditor in 2009, when then-Auditor Gary Blackmer left the position to become director of the state's audit division. She came to the city after serving as Multnomah County's auditor since 2006.

She's developed a reputation for not sugarcoating: audits on the city's long-term financial stability, quality of its infrastructure, overtime pay, government transparency and police accountability can be described as nothing less than blistering. They've

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called into question how well Portland actually works, and created tension between her office and members of Portland's City Council, particularly Mayor Charlie Hales.

Griffin-Valade announced late last year that she will retire at the end of 2014. Her lasting legacy will likely be changes to the Independent Police Review and oversight of Portland's Police Bureau that have happened under her watch and in response to the Department of Justice's findings that Portland's police use excessive force against the mentally ill. The attention directed at the police specifically signaled to Griffin-Valade as she was coming into office that

the topic would consume much of her time as auditor, and present challenges an auditor might not otherwise face.

Between that and interacting with Portland's City Council — a group of people known for strong personalities and a fair heaping of drama — she learned early on that the city of Portland needs a strong auditor.

When Street Roots spoke to Griffin-Valade, she was in the midst of editing an audit of Portland's streetcar services, which is soon to be released.

Amanda Waldroupe: What are some of the core values or beliefs that inform your job on a day-to-day basis?

LaVonne Griffin-Valade: The thrust of my work involves neutrality, independence, impartiality, transparency, and holding accountable myself, the folks who work for me, and for the government I'm auditing and providing some oversight function. I

think what has driven me essentially in every professional endeavor I've been involved in is a search for justice and fairness. That's a value I've always had. That can involve wonky things like spending taxpayer dollars appropriately to ensure that we're able to provide the services the public expects of us. Historically, that's been a tenet that has driven

a lot of change in the United States. I believe very strongly in creating a voice for the public. I'm also very pragmatic. If something requires a strong public statement, to get movement or change, I'm perfectly willing to do that. It's nothing that most auditors really enjoy doing, but the values of justice and fairness and speaking truth to power supersedes any of the concerns that I might have about staying above the fray.

A.W.: How would you characterize the tone of the audits you've conducted?



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L.G.-V.: We work very hard to make sure that the language is neutral, that we're not using a lot of jargon, and we're just presenting the facts. Sometimes just presenting the facts — not making an assessment one way or the other — can be read as pretty strongly worded. I want the tone to be clear. I want the message to be clear. I want the level of neutrality; making strong statements that need to be requirements. I want the public to be able to read it. Commissioners are not always as knowledgeable about the bureaus they're in charge of. It's my goal to get our reports to a point where they're readable and accessible to the public so they can judge for themselves.

A.W.: What do you think the most appropriate response to an audit is on the part of a city elected official or city bureau leaders?

L.G.-V.: My preference would always be that we issue these well-received reports and they're acted on immediately (laughing). About 93 percent of our recommendations are fully implemented, or in the process of

being implemented. Within the industry, that's a very high number. That speaks volumes. I think it's an indication that they take our audits very seriously. We're here to get change. That's our goal.

A.W.: Portland's motto is "the city that works." Given your audits on police accountability, the city's unstable finances, infrastructure improvements and other topics, do you think the city is living up to that pledge?

L.G.-V.: Well, back to being neutral. I think the audits speak for themselves. I think our audits ... demonstrate that the city may aspire to be the city that works, but the city doesn't always work. It is an aspirational goal. But our primary goal is to help the city find ways to improve and ultimately work.

A.W.: On Jan. 8, the City Council passed an ordinance beefing up the Independent Police Review's (IPR) ability to oversee the police bureau and pursue discipline, as part of

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