

Protests persist after three months

Mayor struggles with police response

By REBECCA ELLIS
Oregon Public Broadcasting

In late July, Mayor Ted Wheeler had an idea he hoped would end the nightly clashes between protesters and police in Portland.

He texted Sonia Schmanski, a top aide, that he had a plan that was “high risk,” but he added that the city had “nothing to lose.”

His idea: Tell his police force to stand down from the demonstrations.

It was a move protesters had urged for months, arguing that police decked in riot gear needlessly raised the tensions of the nightly protests. Wheeler told Oregon Public Broadcasting he, too, had noticed a “calming deescalating effect” on nights when police stayed out of sight.

But the protests soon drifted to the east side of the city. And Wheeler said he was persuaded that the plan was too dicey as protesters began targeting police buildings near homes in residential neighborhoods.

“I was persuaded that a complete withdrawal, even for one evening to test the ability to completely deescalate the situation, would be a risk that was too great,” he said. “We could not risk the people who were in the immediate vicinity.”

The Hail Mary was never put to the test. And so, as the city heads toward month four of nightly demonstrations for racial justice, Wheeler seems to find himself very near where he was during month one: without a clear plan to end the now-regular clashes between the police force he oversees and the protesters whose cause he said he embraces.

“We’re all considering all options,” he said. “The core objective here is to create a free and safe space to those people who want to express their First Amendment rights and to compartmentalize and deescalate the violence as much as possible and where it’s safe to do so arrest people and hold them accountable.”

“That’s the formula.”

The issue

How to translate these principles into on-the-ground tactics has flummoxed city leaders.

The worst nights follow the same script: A large group takes to the streets calling for an end to police violence and systemic racism. A small fraction commits low-level crimes — often lighting small fires, graffiti-ing buildings and throwing fireworks or water bottles at officers. The police respond with force against the entire crowd.

Over the last month, demonstrators have been battered with batons as they left protests. Police have charged at crowds until they’re pushed deep into residential neighborhoods. Journalists have



Jonathan Levinson/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Supporters of President Donald Trump and police clashed with anti-fascist counterprotesters.

been shoved and arrested. Tear gas, while used more sparingly than in the early days of the protests, is threatened near nightly. And police regularly shut down protests by declaring them riots. That happened twice over the weekend, though police declined to intervene as far-right activists, some brandishing firearms, brawled with counter-protesters for hours on Saturday afternoon.

Police say it’s not clear how they’re supposed to address individual crimes in the midst of a sprawling crowd. Asking police to make targeted arrests in a swarm of hundreds of people could put both officers and peaceful protesters in danger. Officers worry that not going in at all would be an abdication of their duties.

The mayor recognizes the problem with these scenes that play out on the streets of his city every night: non-violent protesters facing force as police respond to the misbehavior of a few. He just hasn’t found the answer.

“This is the issue, right? I mean, this is the main question,” Wheeler said. “... How do you hold that small number of people accountable without infringing on the First Amendment rights of everyone else?”

Under Portland’s unique form of government, individual City Council members oversee day-to-day management of a portfolio of city agencies. The mayor doles out those assignments, and Wheeler, like most of his predecessors, assigned the police bureau to himself.

As police commissioner, Wheeler helps shape the bureau’s strategy for protest response. But he said he refrains from adding his

‘I WAS PERSUADED THAT A COMPLETE WITHDRAWAL, EVEN FOR ONE EVENING TO TEST THE ABILITY TO COMPLETELY DEESCALATE THE SITUATION, WOULD BE A RISK THAT WAS TOO GREAT.’

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler

voice into the fray of nightly orders that carry it out — though he’s keeping close tabs. He regularly keeps a police-issued radio turned on in his Pearl District condo. When protests wind down, he gets an emailed report from the police command center, with bullet points outlining key decisions made that night. Robert King, his public safety advisor and former head of the police union that represents officers, will weigh in with additional information.

Wheeler said he’ll sometimes follow up, such as getting clarification on why an unlawful assembly or riot was declared or a specific tactic was used. But mostly, he’s leaving nightly tactical decisions and techniques up to the police.

“They’ve tried everything from not showing up to preemptively dispersing crowds, and some of those strategies, in my opinion, have worked well,” he said. “My expectation is the police bureau will evolve, and as they see a need for change, they’ll change.”

Not all in City Hall are convinced. Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty has framed Wheeler’s approach as more

atilt with pipebombs, gunfire and an assault — she re-upped the ask.

Hardesty, a longtime proponent of more civilian oversight of the police, said she’d take a different tack with the nightly demonstrations: she wants to see officers stop wearing riot gear at protests, bar the use of rubber bullets and give the power to declare an unlawful assembly solely to the police chief or mayor.

Wheeler has chosen to hold onto the bureau, leaving him consistently jeered by the crowds who draw a straight line between the police tactics they see each night and the police bureau’s boss.

Public perception

From the outset of protests, Wheeler was, in the eyes of some, ill-equipped to steer the city through a revo-

lution: a wealthy white man leading an overwhelmingly white city and a police force with a long legacy of mistrust within communities of color.

The months of protest response have not helped. After Portland police blanketed the streets downtown with CS gas at the onset of the protests, demonstrators crowned the mayor “Tear Gas Teddy.” In early June, he banned the long-range acoustical device, known as LRAD, and restricted the use of the gas to instances when “life safety” is threatened, a determination he said is made by the incident commander. Wheeler has apologized for the use at the beginning of the protests, but the nickname has stuck.

The mayor had said he is hearing the push for racial justice and equity loud and clear. And he suspects he will continue to hear it for quite some time. Many believe month three of protests marks but a midway point to the November election, when both the president and the mayor are up for reelection. Both his runoff opponent Sarah Iannarone and longtime activist Teresa Raiford, who has launched a write-in campaign, have been extremely critical of his handling of the protests.

“I want to remind people when they say, ‘when is this all going to end?’ the non-violent part of this probably won’t end for quite some time,” Wheeler said. “And I’m reminded regularly by people in this community who were engaged in the struggle for civil rights: The civil rights movement lasted a lot longer than two and a half months.”

And as for the nightly violence that accompanies it?

“I believe this will ultimately burn itself out,” the mayor said.

He said he’s working on a plan to speed that along.

RAYMOND JAMES®



Jamey Hendricks
Financial Advisor
Registered Representative



Jennifer Estner
Advisor Assistant



Mark Hedeon
Financial Advisor
Registered Representative

STOCKS
BONDS
MUTUAL FUNDS
RETIREMENT ACCOUNTS
FDIC INSURED CDS
FINANCIAL PLANNING
ANNUITIES

#1 12TH Street, Suite 7, Astoria, OR 97103
503.325.0677

Securities offered through
RAYMOND JAMES FINANCIAL SERVICES, INC. (MEMBER FINRA/SIPC)
Investment Advisory Services are offered through
RAYMOND JAMES FINANCIAL SERVICES ADVISORS, INC.

WANTED

Alder and Maple Saw Logs & Standing Timber

Northwest Hardwoods • Longview, WA

Contact: John Anderson • 360-269-2500

SUZANNE WEBER
for STATE REPRESENTATIVE

Website: www.weberfororegon.com

Phone number: (503) 994-0164

Email address: suzanne@weberfororegon.com

**SUZANNE WEBER WILL BRING
OUR COMMON SENSE BACK TO SALEM**