

# PortlandTribune

## A NEW CITY BEAT

### Portland's change to park rangers raises some concerns downtown

By Peter Korn

The Portland Tribune, May 31, 2012



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE PHOTO

**Portland park ranger Sam Sachs gets ready to begin a morning patrolling Portland's downtown area parks. Rangers expect to visit each of the 16 downtown parks three times a day.**

Brenton Chose isn't 6-foot-2, he's never served as a military policeman in

Jamaica, and he definitely isn't black. But he feels he's the right man for the job, as a downtown Portland park ranger.

Dan Biederman says Chose might be just that, with the proper training. And Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Corp. in New York City, has a little story to tell.

Thirty years ago Biederman was charged with cleaning up Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan. The park had been taken over by drug dealers and was the frequent scene of violent crime, including murders and rapes.

A number of physical improvements were made to the park in the 1980s. When it came to hiring private security, Biederman and his managers were very specific about who they initially hired to patrol Bryant Park. All the original security officers, he says, were very large, black, male former military police officers from the Caribbean. All, he says, had "wonderful language skills," the ability to make park visitors from different backgrounds comfortable in just a few seconds of conversation.

Within a few years of the makeover, The New York Times was calling Bryant Park, "the town square of Midtown." Crime in Bryant Park virtually disappeared. Today, 4,000 people will take lunch in the park on sunny weekday afternoons.

On May 1, Portland changed the way it provides security in its 16 downtown area parks, and Biederman's experience is worth considering.

No longer are the parks patrolled by private security and Portland police paid for and provided by the Clean & Safe District, managed by the Portland Business Alliance. Instead, City Commissioner Nick Fish has put park security under the aegis of Portland Parks & Recreation, hiring urban park rangers to do the job.

The move to a potentially kinder, gentler park security force has been resisted by a number of influential downtown property owners, who say they want the emphasis on security in the form of more frequent patrols and, in some cases, officers with guns. The only weapon carried by Portland's park rangers is pepper spray.

Brenton Chose is one of those rangers. He and partner Lionel Eyres are beginning their shift this Friday morning in O'Bryant Square on Southwest Washington Street, which for years has been one of downtown's problem parks.

"Good morning. Park ranger," Chose says toward the unmoving bundle of clothes and blankets perched against a stub of a wall in the center of the park. Chose and ranger Sam Sachs persist, and eventually a sleepy-eyed, heavily bearded man peeks out with a look that says he can't believe this is happening. Ten minutes later, he is dragging his possessions away and Chose explains the rules on park camping.

He often allows people to sleep in the park, but if they are under a blanket they've crossed the line into camper.

Chose says it can be hard to ask homeless people to uncover themselves a bit on a cold spring morning just so they can cross the line into legal nappers. But rules are rules.

"As long as there's no blanket and we can't prove they were here overnight, they're able to stay," Chose says.

### **Off the leash**

Campers, drug users and people drinking alcohol in the parks are the most frequent offenders Chose and Eyres confront. Park users with dogs off leash are another. Eyres says the two have heard a fair share of verbal abuse on their patrols, including shouts of "siege heil!" from disgruntled park users.

Eyres says the most belligerent park users he's dealt with so far in downtown parks have been dog owners explaining why their animals didn't need to be on leashes.

"They have every excuse under the sun for why their dog is better than everyone else's," he says.

Pedaling toward the waterfront, Chose says every day one of the ranger bike teams should visit each park in its territory at least three times. He's already noticed drug dealers who move back and forth between O'Bryant Square and the South Park Blocks. When he chases them from one spot, he finds them a few hours later at the other.

Chose and Eyres have continual radio access to Portland police, but the goal of the rangers, according to Parks Security Manager Art Hendricks, is to get people to comply with park rules without making a lot of calls to the police.

Rangers can't arrest anyone or issue most citations. They only have the power to exclude people from parks for breaking the rules, usually for up to 30 days.

Chose was a park ranger with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service before taking the job in Portland. Eyres, from Australia, has worked as a paramedic and wilderness ranger. Both received 130 hours of safety and security training, and both say they are learning on the job.

In the South Park Blocks, the two chat with Sachs, who relates his learning-on-the-job incident. The week before, he and a partner found a woman holding a bull python in Keller Fountain Park. One of the rangers called the city's animal control office and was told that it was legal as long as the snake wasn't six feet or longer. Sachs laughs and says he eyeballed an estimate and decided not to ask her to roll out the snake so he could measure it.

### **On-the-job training**

In Tom McCall South Waterfront Park, Chose and Eyres spot a group of five scraggly men and women with a dog sprawled on the grass. From 20 yards away, Chose can see they are smoking a pipe, and from just a little closer than that he can smell marijuana.

Both men approach the group nonchalantly. One of the men asks Chose for a cigarette and Chose replies that he is out, explaining that he usually carries a few to hand out, even though he doesn't smoke.

He gets appreciative nods for that.

One of the women says the dog's name is Road Kill.

Chose politely has one of the men dump out the pipe on the lawn and step on the weed. No police are called, but the members of the group are issued 30-day park exclusions. Chose tells them he will return in an hour to make sure the group has gone.

Nobody objects.

Not all park ranger exchanges have ended so calmly. In November, Eyres was part of a two-person ranger team in Forest Park that confronted a man who reportedly had a knife and had exposed himself to hikers. The man allegedly attacked the two rangers and, in the ensuing tussle, ended up falling down a 70-foot embankment with Eyres, who suffered a collapsed lung, two broken ribs and a broken sternum.

Since the incident, park rangers have begun carrying pepper spray, which Eyres says might have helped in dealing with the man in Forest Park.

In addition, the incident resulted in a change in communication policy, Eyres says. Now, instead of rangers using their cell phones to call in police, they are equipped with radios linked directly into the police frequency. Eyres says next time he'll give more space to someone who could be dangerous. It was all part of learning on the job, he says.

Later, Chose points out a spot under the Hawthorne Bridge where he and Eyres have had to clean out drug needles and drug paraphernalia. They check a park loo as well, ready to remove the same type of drug material, before heading for a break in the park ranger office in South Waterfront Park.

### **A helpful presence**

Felicia Williams is among those who have voiced concern that the park rangers likely won't provide enough security downtown. Williams, chairwoman of the Downtown Neighborhood Association, says a number of her members like the idea of park rangers -- as an addition to private security, not as replacements.

Fish says the park rangers' model will increase security in the park by increasing the presence of officers.

Williams disagrees.

The Portland Business Alliance's Clean & Safe officers were sometimes joined in the parks by four Portland police officers whose positions were also funded by the alliance. Now that Clean & Safe no longer has the parks contract, those police officers won't make appearances in the park, unless called in an emergency, according to the alliance and confirmed by the Portland Police Bureau.

What Williams calls "an entrenched open-air drug market" in downtown parks such as O'Bryant Square probably won't be controlled by pepper spray-carrying park rangers on bikes, she says.

"If something bad happens and one of those park rangers gets attacked during a drug deal, that's not going to be good," she says.

The new city contract calls for the downtown parks to be patrolled by private security firm Portland Patrol Inc. at night. The company also has the contract to provide security in Pioneer Courthouse Square, where Fish says its officers have done an admirable job.

Williams says she's concerned that not all Portland Patrol Inc. officers have been properly trained.

"This has the potential to go south," Williams says.

Fish sees the park rangers serving as "ambassadors" to park users, and says their ability to move on bikes and to engage park goers will increase the sense that security people are patrolling the parks.

"If I'm a user of the park, I'm going to see more rangers than I did Clean & Safe workers," Fish says. "Clean & Safe came largely to address a problem. We're going to be the eyes and ears of the parks."

And, Fish says, the police bureau is on board.

"We would not have done this had Chief (Mike) Reese not given the green light," he says. "He had a veto."

Fish acknowledges the problems with drug dealing in a number of downtown parks, but he also points out that crime in Portland has declined for years, and that includes incidents in Portland parks.

"The one area I'm worried about is the intersection of gang activity and our parks," he says. "That's what keeps me up at night."

Nevertheless, Fish is convinced park rangers can do the job.

"We don't think our folks have to be armed to be taken seriously," he says.

In 2011, Clean & Safe private security officers issued 1,202 park exclusions, called Portland police for 886 arrests and issued 2,335 warnings to park visitors. Nobody is certain if the park rangers will be matching or exceeding those totals, and the matter may be inconsequential.

Security Manager Hendricks expects the rangers to make an impact in ways that won't show up in the arrest and exclusion totals. For instance, he says, park rangers in their first month on the job have forced dozens of unpermitted vendors who illegally set up in Waterfront Park next to Saturday Market to move. Hendricks also expects that park rangers will more consistently enforce ordinances that require dogs in parks to be on leash.

After two weeks on the job, rangers issued 40 park exclusions and 61 warnings, and cited 34 dog owners for having pets off leash. Rangers have called police officers to the parks eight times. And they set up one park rangers vs. Occupy Portland protesters softball game, scheduled for June 10 at Overlook Park.

### **Guns necessary?**

Sean Suib, executive director of New Avenues for Youth, a nonprofit next to O'Bryant Square that helps homeless youth get off the street, says he can easily see why both sides believe what they do about whether the parks need officers with guns.

With some park users -- homeless people suffering mental illness, for instance -- Suib says armed officers might unintentionally escalate a tense situation. With others, especially some of the transient homeless who have been known to prey on others, he thinks the guns might offer a deterrent.

"In some cases, it's a good thing, and in some cases, it's not," Suib says.

From New York, Biederman says guns aren't really the point.

"Can you have these park rangers without weapons?" Biederman asks. "Absolutely."

Security officers in Manhattan's parks are no longer exclusively large Caribbean ex-MPs. Biederman says they don't need to be. But one thing that hasn't changed is that all the officers receive regular continuing education.

"Training can solve almost all problems," Biederman says. "Really good training."