

Op-Ed Piece for *The Oregonian*

Community Policing should be the watershed issue in this Mayoral Election

by Aron Faegre

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In 1991, Tom Potter took my understanding of how a police force could fit with a community, and turned it upside down. As the architect for the city's first community policing center – the old Fred Meyer on MLK – I got to spend time with Chief Potter and his key Assistant Chiefs Moose and Parisi. I came to personally see and understand what this "community policing" idea was all about.

But first you must understand that I grew up in Chicago, in the 60's. In Chicago the police were referred to as "pigs" in the everyday vernacular of the times. I don't remember ever contacting the police for help. Rather, the effort was always to look out for them, to avoid them. The times my brothers or I, or anyone I knew, needed the police, -- like when we got mugged on State Street (the Chicago street sign includes the phrase "That Great Street") in the middle of the day, or when my brother was beaten up one evening on the "L" Train – the police were not there. They regularly took bribes. They looked angry most of the time. In the integrated, multi-religious community I lived in, we had to learn to put up with the swastika's painted on cars and mailboxes, and racial slurs yelled at friends.

I came to Portland in 1967 to go to Reed College, and found Portland to be a much more pleasant city than Chicago. I felt safer, but then there was that war called Vietnam. And the police were once again taking on a kind of totalitarian role. After Reed, and after the Vietnam War, my next 15 years of experience with the police was kind of neutral. Not too good, but not too bad.

More importantly I was fortunate as an architect to get to work with the Fire Bureau Chiefs and their staff on several projects, and I came to admire how they work as a team. To fight a fire, they must stay coordinated. They only win against a fire with a group of firefighters, good equipment, and then persistence. And then, admirably, there was the Fire Bureau actively working on prevention, too! To get a building permit for any construction project in the city, one must have the plans reviewed by the Fire Marshal's staff. I learned that automatic fire sprinklers were the Fire Bureau's top priority for most larger buildings. First the Fire Bureau fights fires by ensuring our community constructs safe buildings. Only after doing this, do they fight the fires by rolling out the trucks. The Fire Bureau works hard, to try to not have to work!

To contrast this, the police I had observed were more like the Lone Ranger, or a samurai soldier. There were one or two to a car, and they were on their own, to fight the chaos of the world. This was my view of police when I started work on the city's first community policing center on MLK.

To put a police station right into the middle of what, at that time, was one of Portland's highest crime areas, was not an easy task. Many in the community were suspicious of this plan – and I heard the word "pigs" again, in several community meetings that were held to get input for the project. Were the police moving in to again simply "control" the community with their guns and night sticks?

To my surprise, these police – Potter, Moose, Parisi – only smiled when they heard this language of fear. Rather, they calmly repeated their interest in creating a new relationship with the community. They said that "community policing" is about cooperating and integrating with the community to find out the core problems, and then finding ways to solve them, as a community. Thus, Tom Potter added Community Health Nurses as part of his arsenal to fight crime. I attended meetings where obnoxious, angry people were calmed down by a policeman and driven home, rather than to jail.

Tom Potter really did create something new, when he inaugurated community policing in Portland. The word "community policing" was around and being tried in other cities. So it was no surprise to me that when in 1994 the federal government under President Clinton decided to create a federal "community policing" program, they called for Tom Potter to come to Washington D.C. And sadly, I was not surprised that when they learned that he as Chief had marched in a gay pride parade, they sent him home! That was just a little bit too much community.

Community policing can mean a lot of different things. Having worked with Tom Potter in creating the first community policing center for Portland, I learned that it meant it was OK to put the police station in the back, and local community shops in the front of the building. It meant that we were permitted to put a children's wading pool and fountain at the front door to the police station. It meant that we could create a community meeting room right beside the front door, and it could contain art on the walls, made by a highly regarded African American artist living in the neighborhood.

Tom Potter had the vision, calmness, and persistence to show us how community policing could work in 1991. I described my work with the Fire Bureau to point out that working in a "team" or "community" context is not in itself unusual. We take it for granted with the Fire Bureau. It is much harder for police, enforcement agencies, or large entrenched bureaucracies to do.

I look forward to Tom Potter leading our city government so that the "community policing" philosophy can again become strong for the police, but equally important, that he will work to instill this same attitude in the work of other city agencies. Community policing is, at its heart, about democracy. Tom Potter proved his leadership abilities in that toughest job of taking a fairly "normal" police department and opening it up to the community.

After designing the NE Community Policing Center, I did not see Tom Potter for 10 years. But two weeks ago, I went over to his campaign headquarters on election night, on the hope that there might be a run-off. As the evening went on, with the TV cameras running, it was announced that Tom was not just going to get a run-off, he was in the lead. He took the dias and he calmly smiled. He said that the vote results were not about what is "good for Tom Potter", but were about what is "good for Portland". I smiled in agreement, happy for what Portland was getting. He graciously complemented many of the other candidates in the race, and even welcomed one onto the dias to make a statement in front of the TV cameras. Portland needs Tom Potter, to help us reinvent and renew our sense of community, our livability, and our democracy.

Aron Faegre, Architect  
520 SW Yamhill Street  
Portland, Oregon 97204  
503-222-2546

Aron Faegre is a Portland architect who specializes in the design of community facilities such as libraries, parks, police stations, fire stations, and airports, and has been in practice in Portland for 22 years.