

Skateboarding in Portland and Public Disorder

By Richard F. LaMountain

In recent months, the unlikely issue of downtown skateboarding has wheeled into Portland's public-policy arena. To many, the controversy has seemed inconsequential compared to issues like road maintenance, law enforcement, and education. But the issue is about more than just kids skateboarding. The fundamental issue is public order; equally, this discussion involves the way responsible citizens perceive that order.

Background

On December 27, 2000, Portland's City Council voted 3-2 to lift the longstanding ban on downtown skateboarding. Charlie Hales, Erik Sten, and Dan Saltzman were in favor; Vera Katz and Jim Francesconi were opposed.

Hales championed the skateboarders' cause. "I think skating is a legitimate recreational and transportation choice," he said at the council's December 20th meeting. "I want the Portland Police Bureau to focus its enforcement efforts on ensuring safe and responsible behavior on the streets and on the sidewalks—not on the choice of how to move around on those streets and sidewalks."

Many skateboarders testified at that meeting. Howard Weiner, owner of Cal-Skate Skateboards, asserted Portland "should be in the lead to promote all alternative forms of transportation and, in this case, freedom of expression."

Downtown businessmen opposed lifting the ban. Skateboarders "damage the accessibility and the mobility of downtown," testified Gregg Kantor, chairman of the Association for Portland Progress. "We're concerned about safety, the size of these devices, the ability of the riders to be seen,"

seconded Ann Gardner of Schnitzer Investments.

But the ban's supporters tiptoed around a greater concern: that large numbers of ill-behaved skateboarders disconcert and even frighten responsible Portlanders, creating a sense that authority has broken down and that disorder and chaos rule the city.

Order: The Central Ingredient

Portland's downtown is plagued by disorder: public drunkenness, panhandling vagrants, groups of loud, foul-mouthed youths. In their individual instances, these may seem minor. But combined, they amplify each other and threaten to destroy citizens' confidence in their city's ability to maintain order.

Public order—citizens behaving respectfully and responsibly toward others and their property—is the central ingredient of a livable city. Public order provides citizens with social cohesion, a sense of safety, and faith in their governing institutions. Government can promote public order by enacting and enforcing ordinances that put the mature, disciplined interests of its responsible adult majority before its irresponsible and disorderly minority—and before the fleeting

"alternative-lifestyle" interests of its juveniles and still-maturing young adults.

Downtown Skateboarding: A Disorderly Nuisance

Skateboarding, though not overwhelming in itself, contributes greatly to downtown's disorderly mix. Skateboarders tear down busy streets and sidewalks two and three abreast. They sport tattoos, facial piercings and baggy "gangsta" apparel. They use loud, vulgar language and panhandle habitually. For many, skateboarding and its parallel "street culture" have become a lifestyle and an obsession, crowding aside job, education, and impending adult responsibility.

Many skateboarders are acutely contemptuous of authority and adamant about their "right" to destroy property and to threaten, or even harm, pedestrians. This is illustrated in the following quote from the article "City Streets," on the sk8portland.com website:

Nothing quite challenges a skateboarder like the city streets. Countless variations of handrails, curbs, benches, tables, stairs, walls, uneven surfaces and elevations truly test the talent and resourcefulness of any skater. The thrill of being chased off by security or cops is just icing on the cake.

This is not idle talk. I have seen skateboarders leap onto the elegant marble ledge that surrounds the downtown Hilton. I have also seen them tear across decorative brickwork in Waterfront Park—brickwork protected (at least, ostensibly) by city ordinance.

An opinion titled “Burnside’s Future Uncertain?” from the same website further attests to the lack of respect skateboarders have for police or civility:

A cop...came up and talked to a guy skating [at the Burnside skateboard park]...He kinda poked around like the pig he was...F*** the man!

Another skateboarder:

Portland is badass but I have been arrested too many times and f***ed too many bums up. Just stay the f*** out of my way!

Tri-Met bus driver Quentin Borges-Silva wrote in *The Oregonian* of driving downtown

when two skateboarders shot across the intersection. I locked up the wheels of the bus to avoid killing them and hit the horn. Their response was to flip me off and shout an obscenity...nine passengers were thrown on the floor of the bus.

Most damning of all: on New Year’s Eve hundreds of youths rioted downtown, trashing Pioneer Square, looting shops and hurling bottles at police. Footage of the skateboarders using their “rides” to shatter storefront windows was caught on video.

Many of these skateboarders will outgrow their juvenile behavior and become responsible, productive adults. But as yet, they are not adults, and, whether or not it is intentional, their behavior subverts the order downtown requires to remain healthy, productive, and useful.

Portland Tolerates Disorder

Portland’s government is notoriously cavalier toward disorderly behavior.

Throng of delinquents routinely crowd into Waterfront Park, but the City has yet to assign it a permanent police patrol. May Day “demonstrators tear up the Park Blocks, and city commissioners blame police “overreaction.” The “Education Crisis Team” disrupts meetings of Portland’s school board, and the City turns a blind eye each time.

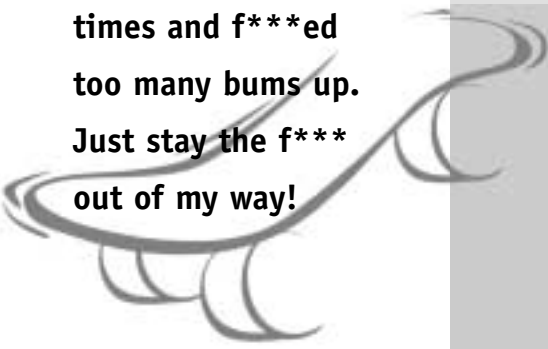
And on December 27, 2001, the City Council legalized downtown skateboarding. Four nights later, did that vote prove the straw that broke the camel’s back? Combined with the many other instances of leniency, did that vote embolden young rowdies to ravage downtown?

This can’t be proved. But surely the riot was no mere case of too much alcohol and disappointment at no organized New Year’s Eve party, as implied by many letters to the editor of *The Oregonian*. “Disorder and crime usually are inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence,” said George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson in their seminal 1982 Atlantic Monthly essay “Broken Windows.” If Kelling and Wilson are right, the Portland City Council’s vote to lift the ban on downtown skateboarding may have inadvertently encouraged rioters to believe they would not be punished for destructive acts.

Government By Adults, For Adults

Responsible adults are Portland’s backbone. They have paid, and continue to pay, their dues in life. They have earned the right to have their city’s

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government put their interests first and foremost and enact policies that will assure safety, civility, and order in public places.

Portland’s City Council has violated that right. By lifting the downtown skateboarding ban, the Council has proved itself unwilling to mandate order, even on Portland’s most visible streets. And it has elevated young skateboarders’ concerns to the same moral plane as the concerns of working Portlanders. By doing so, the Council has not just inadvertently furthered, but has—in effect—validated, disorderly conduct.

At its earliest opportunity, the City Council should reinstate the downtown skateboarding ban. Alone, this will not restore public order, but it will send a powerful message: In Portland, adults are back in charge.



Richard F. LaMountain is a former writer and editor for *Conservative Digest* and currently is an associate editor for *Oregon’s Future*.