Business leader Brian Owendoff saves his brickbats for his online persona

By Allan Classen

When Brian Owendoff introduced Mayor Sam Adams to speak at a Portland Business Alliance luncheon last month, he offered the usual courtesies. Owendoff, who is area manager of C.B. Richard Ellis real estate and hosts the PBA's Public Policy Committee, knows how to act in public.

He has also, apparently, learned when to keep his hardened thoughts to himself … and the thousands of people reading OregonLive and other blogs.

Using the screen name ForestHeightster (which was changed to Acta Non Verba or ActionNotWords after he learned the Examiner was following his postings), the 42-year-old commercial real estate magnate has offered less charitable opinions of the Portland mayor.

“Sam has no integrity,” Owendoff wrote under a pseudonym on OregonLive Sept. 16. “Sam has no fiscal responsibility. Sam will go down as a one-term mayor and among the weakest leaders the Rose City has ever seen. He will be pumping gas at the Chevron at 19th [sic] and Burnside before 2011.”

He disparaged Adams’ call for a 75-day study to consider whether the city should join the Joint Terrorism Task Force as “more bureaucratic analysis paralysis at taxpayers’ expense.”

Presumably unaware of Owendoff’s true feelings toward him, Adams appointed him to a panel on the future of Memorial Coliseum. Owendoff’s alter ego did not seem to be grateful, calling the process “a complete waste of time” and noting that if even one city commissioner “had the courage and political will to champion the construction of a new ballpark, it would have happened.”

Owendoff has opinions on others in the news. He called Bob Sallinger of the Portland Audubon Society an environmental extremist and one of the reasons for Oregon’s high unemployment rates. He refers to 1000 Friends of Oregon as “1000 Friends.”

Owendoff tars Gov. John Kitzhaber (“cohabitation is sin”), President Barack Obama for his health care and financial stimulus programs (“Obama is no reformer, he is a failure”), and to his way of thinking, the whole city of Portland is dominated by people with wrong-headed political views.

This newspaper has often printed anonymous comments or op eds in The Oregonian, and Owendoff wrote the Examiner. “Who is the ForestHeightster you are referring to, and how do you believe it is related to me?”

Although the Examiner provided Owendoff a list of the parallels between himself and the anonymous poster, he offered no explanation and insisted that no more messages be sent to him. (See story on page 5.)

Shut up, Allan: No one takes you seriously.

Harsh online criticism is nothing new, and nastier comments than these can be seen any day on many electronic forums. The notable thing about Owendoff’s posting is that he is a prominent business person with direct paths to political influence. And he is hammering people with whom he has professional dealings, people he could speak directly with about his concerns had he the integrity to do so.

When he took me out to breakfast a year ago, he was nothing but cordial and positive, giving no hint of the contempt harbored below the surface.

Why would someone act like a lion under the cover of anonymity and a man of manners in the light of day? Don’t look to Owendoff to provide the answer because he denies the electronic postings are from him.

“I have no connection with what appears to be an anonymous poster providing opinions on articles and op eds in The Oregonian,” Owendoff wrote the Examiner. “The Northwest Examiner is worth what a reader pays for it: absolutely nothing!” he wrote in reaction to a December Oregonian profile on Examiner Publisher Allan Classen. “In addition to being good bird-cage liners, the Northwest Examiner is also excellent for potty training puppies and to wrap used fish parts.”

Do customers consider paid parking a joke?

By Allan Classen

The president of the Nob Hill Business Association said private parking lots along Northwest 23rd Avenue are so expensive she has stopped telling her customers about them.

Pat Fielder, owner of Child’s Play and recently elected interim president of the business group, was responding to a survey of Northwest 23rd Avenue merchants printed in the January Northwest Examiner. The paper reported that only four of 18 businesses—all of whom were provided with flyers listing seven off-street lots along the avenue—shared the parking information with an anonymous “shopper.”

“In our defense,” said Fiedler, her customers find the option of paying $3 an hour to park unreasonable.

“When we say, yes you can park for $3 an hour, they just laugh in our faces,” she said.

Fiedler’s comments were made at the Jan. 18 meeting of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee to the Northwest Parking Plan. The group is advising Mayor Sam Adams on a parking management plan for the Northwest District. Elements of the plan include a combination of metered on-street parking and permits for most of the district, promotion of transit alternatives and management of off-street parking facilities.

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Tracking a cyber bully

By Mike Ryerson

It’s increasingly evident that the internet has created new ways for people to take out anger and say things they don’t have the guts to say to someone’s face. Bullies never had it so easy.

The Oregonian recently ran a feature story about Northwest Examiner publisher Allan Classen.

About a dozen readers posted reactions to the story on the paper’s website, including three digs by someone calling himself ForestHeightster.

“Allan is an annoying flea and will eventually get squished as the silent majority is now speaking out,” he wrote. “He is a sorry obstructionist with a personal vendetta against anyone that takes business risks and gets on a plane (with your bike and your kickball) and move to Europe.”

That’s bold. The silent majority has an anonymous spokesman.

But our publisher is just one of many things this poster didn’t like about Portland.

“Portland: sleeping in until 11:00 and you’re in heaven. Portland: where young people go to retire. Elected officials generally reflect the beliefs and the ‘culture’ of people go to retire. Elected officials generally reflect the beliefs and the ‘culture’ of Portland.”

“Many supporters of 1000 Friends of Oregon] are East Coast trust funds that moved to Oregon and do not care about the economy. They have their millions and are not interested in creating an entrepreneurial environment to allow others to share in the American dream. These supporters want zero growth so they can have 20 minutes to their favorite fly fishing hole or hunting ground.”

“I wondered what motivates lurked behind the nasty tone.

As it happens, OregonLive allows readers to see other comments by the same poster. After reading a few of his other posts, I realized I had stumbled into a gold mine.

Plenty of clues!

Clue #1: “I was one of 32 people that sat on the Rose Quarter Advisory Committee.”

What started out to be a needle in a haystack search suddenly turned into a game of elimination from a list of 32.

That’s how many people are on the committee. Assuming he lived in Forest Heights, I trimmed off about a dozen who, according to a phone directory, lived elsewhere.

Clue #2: “I am hardly out of my league. Have been in commercial real estate for 20 years.”

Clue #3: “I have created over 250 jobs with the average pay of over $75,000.”

Factoring in for bragging, it seems our bully is a big shot in commercial real estate.

Clue #4: “I lived in Cleveland (east suburb Shaker Heights) for over 30 years . . . .”

Wow, which house?

Next, I entered each remaining name on the mayor’s advisory committee with the words “Shaker Heights” in the Google search bar.

Bingo! One gentleman on my shortened list had been a Citizen Member of the Shaker Heights Economic Development Committee.

Things are looking good, but have you ever woke up in the middle of the night thinking, “Could more than one in 20 people in Portland possibly have lived in Shaker Heights, Ohio during their lives?”

Clue #5: “Both Portland (my current city) and Cleveland have great aspects and challenges.”

Continued on page 6

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<td>Comment on OregonLive Website, August 11, 2010 and September 6, 2010</td>
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Cyberbully continued

This clue came from the Cleveland newspaper, where the poster entered comments on occasion using the same screen name.

Clue #6: “I live in a housing development on the west side of Portland that is not designed for commercial development. It is also on a 15 degree slope 1,500 feet above sea level...not flat land that can accommodate buildings to house jobs.”

Sounds like Forest Heights.

The poster also mentions being married with three children, and he shows interest in Forest Park School in one comment. By coincidence, Ownendoff is also married with three children.

The list of likely suspects that fit the cyber bully’s profile was now very small. In fact, it was down to one.

So I contacted the guy I thought was ForestHeightster (soon thereafter, all ForestHeightster posts were changed to the screen names ActionNotWords or Acta Non Verba), perhaps not knowing that searching for anyone of the three tags would lead to all of their comments in both The Oregonian and the Cleveland Plain Dealer, which are owned by the same company.

After compiling all the clues, I concluded that the cyber bully was Brian Ownendoff (see chart). When I emailed him to ask if he was the person who uses the screen names I’ve mentioned, he replied that he didn’t know what I was referring to, adding “Your threats are being referred to my attorney.”

The strange thing is, he wasn’t curious enough to want to know who the actual person might be. After all, if it’s not him, it’s someone else who served on the Rose Quarter Committee, is in the same line of business, and their kids are going to school together.

I told them, they think alike.

Here’s what Ownendoff said on Oregon Public Broadcast’s Think Out Loud last month:

“Today, to get something out of the ground, you need three things: an investment-grade tenant, at least a 12-year lease term and a property in the center of the fairway; a shoe that fits at least 90 percent of the marketplace.”

Last August, Acta Non Verba wrote:

“To get a building financed today, you need to have an investment-grade tenant under a 12-plus year lease term.”

On Jan. 8, Acta Non Verba weighed in on a story about former Portland Mayor George Williams:

“Portland should declare the home of George Williams as a historic landmark and never be able to tear it down for 4,000 years. Did Billy Carter ever sleep in Portland, because that house warrants historic status.”

Ownendoff used the same metaphor when he posted on OregonLive 11 days later in his own name:

“This is akin to declaring a building that Billy Carter [Jimmy’s alcoholic brother] once slept in a historic building.”

If Ownendoff and Acta Non Verba are not the same person, they are at least of one mind.

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Owendoff response

We sent draft copies of the stories about Brian Ownendoff before publication and asked him to respond. He sent the following statement Jan 28.

Allan: I am writing to apologize to you. It was wrong for me to express anonymous opinions on the OregonLive website to a Dec. 25, 2010 article about you and the Northwest Examiner. I was wrong to use language that was not polite and made personal to you.

These opinions are not representative of views or opinions of my employer. The comments were solely made by me as a private citizen.

While a relatively new Oregonian, I have grown frustrated by our region’s lack of focus on job creation and numerous systemic roadblocks to growing a business in Oregon. More jobs mean more taxes for social equity, schools and infrastructure.

I am reaching out to Mayor Adams about the pending Northwest Examiner article to apologize to him as well. While I do not always agree with decisions made by City Hall, our mayor deserves respect. My comments did not show respect.

I moved my family 2,500 miles from Ohio for a better life in Oregon. I care deeply for our state. While I will continue to be outspoken, I will do so with full disclosure, integrity and in a respectful way.

Brian Ownendoff
NW Portland

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