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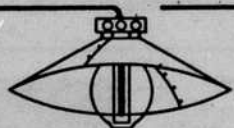
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World News from the
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PUBLIC INTEREST

Human Rights Commissions in danger

by Kevin Collins

Several citizens groups have voiced concern that the city of Eugene's push for economic development may be pushing the city's various Human Rights Commissions by the wayside. The various commissions which serve as advisory panels for the Eugene City Council have undergone significant budget cuts in recent years and supporters fear further slashes from the budgetary knife.

Essentially, the commissions were formed to advise the City Council with regard to the impact and infringements on various groups due to legislative or other actions. These include commissions on the aging, minorities, the disabled, women and youth. While they possess no formal power, these commissions have been quite active with regard to recent controversies such as the gut cruising ordinance and alleged racism in the schools.

Ironically, two of the recent mobilization efforts of these commissions have dealt with activities involving the mayor and a prominent city councilperson. Specifically, the Com-

mission on Aging was quite active in mobilizing citizen support to fight the proposed repeal of the Condo Conversion Ordinance. This proposed repeal was introduced by Councilperson Rob Bennett soon after his election last November and would have removed some protections for apartment dwellers and made it easier for developers to convert buildings into condos.

The Commission on Aging and other groups fought this repeal on the grounds that it could have a seriously detrimental effect on a large segment of senior citizens who live in apartments. Mr. Bennett is one of the area's most prominent developers and his role in promoting this repeal induced state Senator Larry Hill to introduce a conflict of interest bill in the state legislature.

Most recently, the Commission on the Disabled has been involved in a controversy surrounding the Fifth Street Public Market which is owned solely by Mayor Brian Obie. Commission Chairperson Nancy Brawner Jones contends that officials of the Market signed an agreement five years ago agreeing to make the market handicapped accessible within five years or when any vertical or horizontal construction occurred—which ever came first. Both horizontal and vertical construction has occurred and the five-year period expires Dec. 31, 1987. Market manager Doug Obie, the mayor's son, has requested an indefinite extension despite the fact that the market has recently undergone extensive renovations.

Nancy Brawner Jones contends that it is not just the specific access issue of the market that concerns the commission but the overall message that this scenario sends to the community. "The Market is a highly visible commercial complex in this city and, incidentally, we receive more complaints about this building than any other in the area," she contends. "What is, perhaps, of more concern is the fact that other business owners and landlords will ask the question: 'If the mayor does not have to comply, then why should we have to?'" she

adds.

While the city of Eugene has enjoyed a reputation as being in the vanguard of protecting the rights of the disabled, Brawner-Jones suggests that this is becoming something of a facade. She terms "scandalous" the fact that the playground, which was constructed on the mall as part of recent renovations paid for by taxpayers, is not handicapped accessible. This is, she states, "in spite of the fact that the commission raised objections about the plans from the outset of the project and we were ignored."

Brawner-Jones contends that the problem lies often more with city staff than with the City Council. For example, the city's single paid human rights commissioner position has been vacant for six months and no immediate plans to fill it have been forthcoming. Several commission members suggest that City Manager Mike Gleason may be using this as a budget cutting measure. She states, "It is doubtful that any elected official wants to be characterized as being anti human rights or any particular constituency. Yet, if the funds that the Council allocates are not spent by the city, it is an empty allocation. There is, currently, \$95,000 allocated for the human rights commissions and each commission is receiving about \$1300 yearly. That is less than \$10,000. Where is the other \$85,000? Is it merely being saved for other city projects such as the airport?"

Commission personnel state that each commission receives thousands of volunteer hours each year while the city "lends" staff to the commissions on a rotating basis. Such a scenario, coupled with recent council suggestions that some of the commissions be subsumed under various service delivery agencies, has proponents concerned about the future effectiveness of the commissions.

At a recent budgetary work session of the City Council, support was generally strong for maintaining the current level of financial support for the commissions. Only Mayor Obie and Councilperson Roger Rutan gave the commissions the lowest priority score.

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