

# Pouring the java down hard



Graphic by Tom Ette

## Brew bubbles through veins of state's lawmakers

By DANA TIMS  
Of the Emerald

SALEM — A figure clicks along one of the Capitol's subterranean corridors at an ungodly pace — a blur of movement. Fingers on one hand are snapping in answer to the other. Occasionally, in his dash down the poorly lit hallway, the man clenches a fist and bashes it against the dull pink cement wall.

He has just consumed seven cups of coffee in the Capitol's only restaurant and, like most of state government's employees and officials, he spends much of his day wired on caffeine.

Coffee is America's preferred drug when it comes to getting up in the morning, taking aim at the day and "hitting it." But it has a special place in the Capitol. Few people are required to hit it harder.

Coffee is the bounding, black mascot of the Legislature.

While alcohol is banned inside the Capitol, caffeine, which once meant "wine" in Arabic, is everywhere. A purist could get strung out through osmosis. And its prevalence, it seems, indicates a need: a very strong need.

"I'm a nervous individual," says Rep. Mary Ford, R-Beaverton, lighting a cigarette and sipping a cup of Boyd's. Ford claims she resumed drinking coffee when the session started in January, after having quit for two years.

"I need the coffee to keep me going," Ford admits. "I commute from Portland every day and by the time I get here in the morning I need the lift."

Rep. Jeff Gilmour, D-Jefferson, says he never drinks coffee — except when the Legislature is in session. He drinks it

because it is "available," but adds, "I've never thought about it."

Such an answer is common. Many say they do drink coffee but it's a rare "Capitolist" who knows why.

Gilmour, like many other legislators, estimates he drinks five to six cups of coffee per day. Of course, it's not popular to claim to be a drug user of any type and other officials hesitated and calculated before responding to questions regarding their caffeine intake.

"That's a pretty oddball topic to be asking about," says Rep. Bill Markham, R-Riddle. About his daily coffee habits, Markham said, "I don't have an observation in that area."

"I rarely drink coffee," says Rep. Bill Rutherford, R-McMinnville, staring at the steaming cup of black brew before him. "Bad physical effects."

There is little evidence that a dose of 250 milligrams of caffeine per day is harmful to an adult. One cup of regular coffee, however, contains 100 to 150 milligrams.

If many legislators are downing six or more cups of coffee per day, a sizable number of them may be subject to caffeine-related health problems, according to the Drug Information Center.

A dose of six cups daily results in physical dependence. If a coffee drinker misses that morning injection, drowsiness will ensue, accompanied by headaches and irritability.

The only relief from these symptoms may be another cup of coffee.

Caffeine affects the cardio-vascular system and acts as a powerful central nervous system stimulant. It interferes with sleep and alters moods.

Mood changes resulting from caf-

feine withdrawal, according to the DIC, could be a contributing factor to traffic accidents. Imagine that destructive potential loose and rampaging through the state Capitol in the form of 90 lawmakers.

The chance of mass withdrawal, thankfully, is slight. Coffee plays both economic and symbolic roles in the Legislature and is never far from any conversation — particularly in the basement restaurant.

"A lot of our profits come from coffee sales," says Bea King, district manager for Canteen company, which owns the coffee shop. "If a waitress has nothing else to do," she notes, "she should have a pot of coffee in her hand."

Although the coffee shop is only one of nearly 100 caffeine fill-up stations in the Capitol, it is by far the most frequented. Coffee is the catalyst for conversation in the place most people try to spend an hour per day, just to stay informed.

King estimates that more than 75 gallons of coffee are served each day in the restaurant, which also features cinnamon rolls dripping with butter. She doesn't know exactly how many people use the coffee shop daily, but one of her waitresses guesses that 95 percent of her patrons drink coffee.

"Most of the people are in here three times a day," she claims. "We see a lot of others much more than that. They sit for an hour at a time and drink seven to eight cups while they talk and do business."

In addition to the coffee shop, most of the Legislature's 33 committees have their own coffee-makers. Committees

that buy coffee from one local distributor receive a coffee-maker in return.

Committee members are responsible for paying their own coffee bills. Sen. Jack Ripper, D-North Bend, says his coffee runs about \$40, the price of an ounce of marijuana, and lasts him a month. Ripper drinks seven to eight cups per day.

But it is lobbyists who provide coffee for most committees. "The most active lobbyist for each committee usually provides the coffee," says one staff secretary.

By supplying a drug which causes physical dependency even in moderate doses, lobbyists may hold more sway over legislators than they, or the Ethics Commission, realize.

"I deal with so many important issues that how much coffee I drink strikes me as inconsequential," says Rep. Sandy Richards, D-Portland. "But I drink it for the stimulant effects. It picks me up in the mornings."

Rep. Ted Bugas, R-Astoria, drinks three to eight cups per day. He says he sometimes gets jittery and feels lightheaded during committee meetings.

"It'd probably be better if I quit drinking the damn stuff," he says.

Reports filter down from the House Lounge that more representatives are drinking buttermilk and juice this session. But coffee is the blood of the place and is there to stay.

Why? Because it's available, because it's cheap, it speeds up business. And because they depend on it.