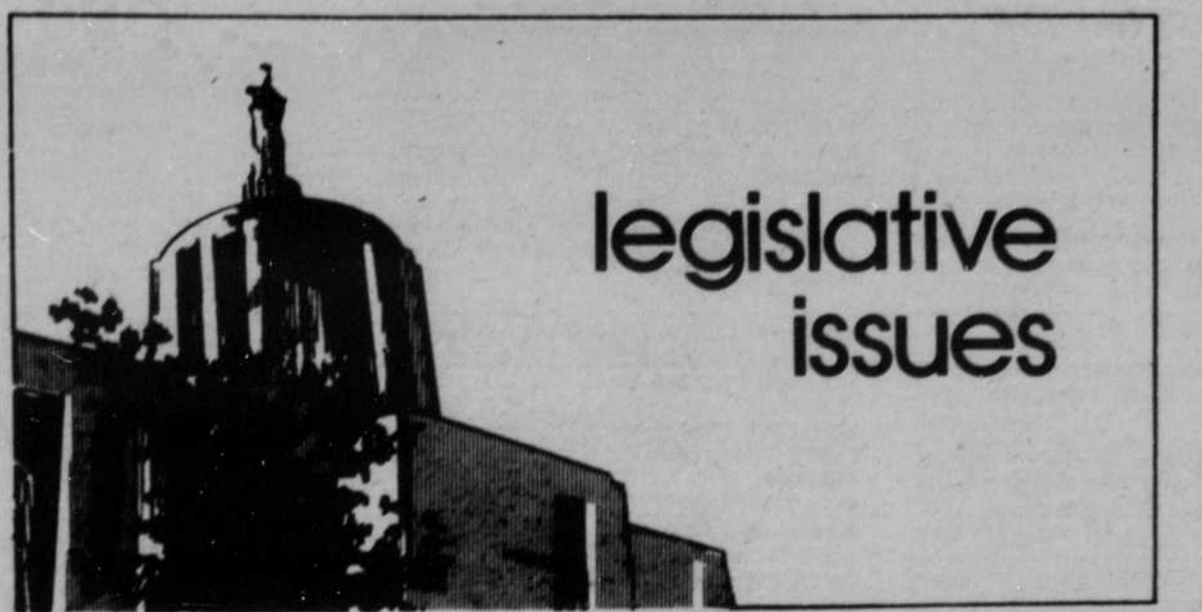
Bill rerouted to committee

Sexist insurance rate draws debate

By DANA TIMS
Of the Emerald

SALEM—Statistics indicate that women outlive men. Insurance companies figure lifespan discrepencies, listed on a mortality table, into their rate structures. Traditionally, they have charged women lower life insurance rates and have paid them less in retirement annuities due to longer life expectancies.

"It's like if you sold insurance to people and dogs," explains Kik Isham, head of the rates and forms office of the state insurance division. "Since dogs don't live as long you'd charge them higher rates for equal coverage. Likewise, you'd give people less in retirement payments because they'll be collecting longer."



Tuesday, the House considered HB 2445, sponsored by Rep. Gretchen Kafoury, D-Portland. The measure would prohibit insurance companies from discriminating in the availability of insurance or in the application of insurance rates because of sex, race, religion, marital status, color or national origin.

After 45 minutes of debate, the body voted 28-27 to again refer the bill to the Business and Consumer Affairs Committee.

Proponents of the measure say discrimination against women is inherent in current rate setting practices. They blame the referral vote on a week-long information barrage from the insurance lobby that has "muddled the issue completely."

"The insurance companies have done in the past week just what I said they would do," Kafoury said after the vote. "They've come off the wall with all kinds of new information that no one had seen before."

She acknowledged the life-span differences between men and women, but added "84 percent of males and females live the same number of years. That means because of the other 16 percent, women are having to pay more into retirement programs or get less out. That is neither fair nor sound judgment."

Kafoury also accused insurance companies of using data collected in 1958 to calculate mortality rates. "And we're all aware of how much life has changed since then."

"I've received assurances from Max Rijken, D-Newport, (chairer of the committee) that the bill will get back out of committee," Kafoury said. She expects a hearing on it sometime next week.

The bill's opponents claim that discrimination is necessary in setting insurance rates. The only distinction that must be drawn, they maintain, is between "fair" and "unfair" discrimination.

"The actual truth," claimed Rep. Kip Lombard, R-Ashland, "is that women live longer than men. If they're going to be around for 10 extra years to collect, then their rates should be adjusted." He said reverse discrimination may take place if rates are statutorily made the same.

Rep. Drew Davis, D-Portland, agreed that the rates are fair.

"When you walk into an insurance office, all they know about you is your age and sex," he said. "They can only put you into a general category."

Davis added he was tempted to support the bill "because it might mean lower rates for the male species. Maybe the male caucus should get together and back it." Rep. Tom Mason, D-Portland, countered that although blacks don't live as long as whites they aren't charged on a dual rate schedule.

"We can't anymore justify discriminating against women than we can against blacku," Mason said, "no matter what statistical tables show." The issue has been in the Legislature since 1973 and continues to struggle.

The bill may face its final test next week.

Survey favors alternative development

A telephone survey by Students For a Nuclear Free Future suggests most people support spending more money on research for alternative energy sources.

The survey, conducted May 8 and 9, was intended to determine Lane County residents' interest in governmental affairs, including the performance of U.S. Rep. Jim Weaver, D-Ore., and U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood, R-Ore., according to a SNUFF representative.

All those persons interviewed were registered Lane County voters; 17 were 18-24 years old, 27 were 25-34 years old, 15 were 35-44 years old, 13 were 45-54 years old and 25 were 55 or older.

All supported spending more money to explore alternative energy sources, such as solar energy, wind, geothermal and wood wastes.

Sixty-four percent said that if a nuclear power plant accident occurred, the federal government should be liable for loss of life and property and that the power companies should not be.

Sixty-three percent opposed further power plant construction in Oregon until the federal government begins operating a safe and permanent waste repository.

More than half claimed they would vote to restrict construction of nuclear power plants if an election were held.

The survey concluded with questions about the activities of Packwood, Weaver and U.S. Rep. Les AuCoin, D-Ore.

More than 85 percent were not sure whether AuCoin "gets things done and acts as a good representative," or if he supports alternative energy development.

Nearly half expressed similar concerns about both Weaver and Packwood.

Seventy-five percent of those interviewed said Eugene is a "friendly place" to live and 46 percent said it is liberal.

SNUFF is a student organization concerned with the development of alternative energy sources.