

A Domestic Debate

OUR OPINION: The fight to gain medical benefits for domestic partners doesn't need to be so complex

The idea of offering benefits to partners of employees who are homosexual is obviously controversial. Views on the subject cut through moral and social divides, and each side of the debate has its own unwavering opinions that are unlikely to ever change.

Now this contentious issue is coming to the University, and it shows no sign of disappearing anytime soon.

And rightfully so. Such an important subject needs to be addressed, and rushing the process will do no one any good.

After discussion of the topic for years, a focused lobbying group has emerged on campus in favor of the benefits. The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Concerns Committee is pushing for medical benefits to be extended to the spouses of University employees who are gay.

The local movement caught steam recently when a Multnomah County judge ruled last summer that another public state college, Oregon Health Sciences University,

must offer benefits to domestic partners of all state workers.

And more than 30 universities across the country have also extended benefits, including Harvard, Yale and Stanford.

But when it pertains to the University, the issue brings up many problems.

First off, state law currently defines "spouse" as only a married partner. And any University decision must follow state law.

Second, a University decision must also bow to the final decision of the Oregon State Board of Higher Education. Currently, the board's policy only offers benefits to married couples and their dependents.

So no matter how much the committee lobbies on the University level, it is the powers that be who make the final call.

Probably the most intriguing problem in the whole issue, however, lies not in the question of whether domestic partners deserve benefits but in the exact definition of "domestic partner."

The committee has focused its efforts on obtaining rights for gay partners, but many long-term relationships also exist among heterosexual couples. Where does one draw the line?

For the committee, focusing on gay rights makes more sense legally. Homosexual couples do not have the ability to marry (and therefore to obtain benefits) that straight couples have. So fighting for such a right for gay couples lends itself to more potential success.

But for others, the question still remains. Many heterosexual couples will not marry, for whatever reason, and therefore could benefit from medical coverage. Should their cause not be championed?

If the problem is to be resolved, a state definition of "domestic partner" must exist. Regardless of sexual preferences, domestic partner lobbyists are really fighting for the same rights. State requirements for reaching "domestic partner" status would help unite the cause and clear up a lot of gray areas in the debate. These could include the number of years the couple has been together, shared residence and other shared resources.

The rights of domestic partners to receive benefits may never be completely resolved, but it doesn't have to be quite so complicated.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board.

Overheard

"I've always felt that I have the fun job on television. Now it's going to be even better."

Vanna White from "Wheel of Fortune" on the new puzzle board that allows her to touch a switch to display the correct letter.

"It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice."

Late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's theory on effective leadership.

"I don't want it to be, 'Well they took the blood and dropped the sock.'"

Bill Cosby's appeal to police to make the case against his son's murderer air-tight.

"I guess I could be facing some serious charges right now."

Danny Bonaduce of "The Partridge Family" after staging a car accident for his radio show that police thought was real.

"We all should be joyful today. Our technology permits a change of the organs in animals so they are less threatening to the human immunology."

Scientist Ian Wilmut's reaction to successfully cloning a sheep.

"I would rather see Amos n' Andy. At least they were just straight up Uncle Tommin'. We've gone backwards."

Spike Lee's criticism of Warner Brothers' and United Paramount's portrayal of black stereotypes in their television programs.

"The best-kept contraceptive secret is no longer a secret."

FDA Commissioner David Kessler on the release of the morning after pill.

"I did not have any strangers here. The Lincoln Bedroom was never 'sold.'"

President Bill Clinton's denial that he let his top campaign donors spend the night in the White House.

The Drawing Board



State Forestry Department needs widespread reform

The Oregon Department of Forestry is more interested in quick fixes than really solving problems like landslides

James E. Brown offers an interesting perspective on the work of the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) in his guest column (Feb. 7, ODE). But perhaps his view is a bit detached from reality.

He says the agency is "currently conducting vigorous geotechnical investigations" of the fatal November landslides. Hooray for them, but it is a bit late.

The relationship between clear cutting, road building and landslides is already well-established. Apparently, Brown is too busy writing public relations pieces to read the scientific literature or talk to his co-workers.

A 1995 ODF study concluded, "Timber harvests in sensitive areas... may increase failure rates from two to forty times over rates on undisturbed sites."

Here is just one example of how the ODF works to keep "Oregon safe from landslides":

Susan and Rick Moon built their home in the Douglas County community of "Stump Acres" in 1973. Thirteen years later, they learned that Champion International was planning to clear cut the steep slope above their home. A forester visited the area and determined that their home had a "high potential for slide damage" if the unit was cut.

Despite this and other information, ODF had neither the will nor the power to do anything but issue a clear cutting permit. ODF area director Craig Royce said, "ODF is not in the business of protecting houses," and district forester Steve Truesdel acknowledges that the agency does not "have the authority to not allow activities on private land."

In 1987, fellers rappelled down the slope and cut down the trees, clear cutting a 160-acre area. Nine years later, after hard rains and failing root systems that had lost their

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ability to hold the slope in place, the hillside came down upon the life and home of the Moon family.

While Mr. Brown and others at ODF prattle on about the great work they are doing and the need for more studies, Oregon's forests are being beat to death.

Management practices required by the Oregon Forest Practices Act (OFPA) focus on site-specific "quick fixes" rather than holistic solutions. The result is decreased function of ecosystems and watersheds, degraded water quality and lost forest productivity.

Real reform of ODF and the OFPA is critically needed, but it won't happen when agencies and institutions are bought off by the likes of Boise Cascade, Willamette Industries, Weyerhaeuser and the rest of the industry.

What happens on "private" and "industrial" forest lands affects us all. Functioning forest ecosystems provide clean water and air, sites for nutrient cycling and a place for critters to live. When managed with foresight and responsibility, such forests can also provide jobs for local communities.

When the ODF finishes its "critical" studies a couple months from now (after the coming logging season has come and gone), Brown says ODF "may make recommendations that could lead to changes in current forest laws" [italics added].

If sustainable forest management practices are to provide for long term health of ecosystems and economies, real change is necessary before it is too late. For all its studying and stalling, the ODF is doing very little to implement such change.

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