

Education, environment to be topics at town meeting

Two state congresswomen will participate in today's discussion in Eugene

By Amy Jennaro
Oregon Daily Emerald

A town hall meeting today will provide Eugene citizens with the opportunity to discuss community and statewide problems with Sen. Susan Castillo (D-Eugene) and Rep. Kitty Piercy (D-Eugene).

The meeting will examine a variety of issues, but Castillo and Piercy said they see educational, environmental and transportation problems as being of primary concern.

Castillo said an important issue being debated this legislative session is the problem of getting funding for public schools.

"It seems to me that we are going

to have to discover more ways to provide additional revenue to meet the needs of our schools," she said.

Piercy said there are a variety of ways to find more money for schools.

"We need to look at the issue of finding more tax loopholes or using the kicker to provide funding to schools," she said.

Another debated issue is the legislative proposal to build charter schools to provide better services to students who some say are lacking quality education in the public schools.

Castillo said she views the creation of charter schools as a way for the Legislature to avoid examining school budget problems.

"The charter schools take away the focus from what we should be doing about the problems in our

Town hall meeting

- WHO: state Sen. Susan Castillo and state Rep. Kitty Piercy
- WHAT: town hall meeting, no specific issues
- WHEN: 7 p.m. today
- WHERE: River Road Community Center, 1400 Lake Rd.

public schools," she said.

Another issue that both congresswomen consider to be important is extra funding for student parents and increased grants for students. Students from all of Oregon's higher education establishments went to Salem for Lobby Day on Feb. 23 in an attempt to draw more attention to student issues. Castillo said she was impressed with the students' dedication.

"I think students do a great job in keeping support for issues," she said.

Castillo plans to back a proposed piece of legislation to give more benefits to student parents.

"I am very supportive of the system of higher education and getting increased access for student parents," she said.

Piercy said she embraces plans to increase monetary aid to students but is dubious about the Legislature's ability to get enough money to support proposed legislation that would increase student grants.

"I do think it will be a challenge to get a budget together and try to reform higher education," she said.

Piercy said she sees issues in the transportation system as being another area of importance.

"We have great problems in in-

frastructure we have to deal with," she said.

Piercy cited crumbling roads, clogged streets and updating the bus system as primary concerns.

Another issue is the possible repealing of Eugene's "toxic right to know" law, which informs citizens about chemicals being used in their communities. Piercy and Castillo are against a referendum being considered by the Legislature that would nullify the law.

"The 'right to know' law is a part of Eugene's decision-making process," Piercy said.

Castillo said she hopes the meeting will help the public to increase its participation in community issues.

"It's an open agenda," she said. "Any question anyone may have they can ask."

Higher Education Project director lobbying for student rights

The former OSPIRG chairman has helped students with lobbying

By Kristina Rudinskas
Oregon Daily Emerald

Advocating for student interests in the political realm is a job for both professional and student staffs.

Networking and advocating for student interests can take different forms.

Professional lobbying at national level

Ivan Fishberg has seen student activism evolve over the years on campuses across the nation. As director of United States Public Interest Research Group's Higher Education Project, Fishberg has lobbied in Washington, D.C., for student rights, lower loan interest rates and amendments to the Reauthorization of Higher Education Act.

USPIRG a national organization that advocates for consumer, environmental and social causes.

Today, students fight for different and more complex issues such as child care and student health care, Fishberg said.

"Students today are more sophisticated and savvy in their approach to their activism," he said.

Fishberg's political career began at Lane Community College in 1989 when he worked with the Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group and student government. He later chaired OSPIRG in 1991.

His passion for protecting student rights didn't end with the end of his college education. Fishberg went on to be a campus organizer in Oregon and Missouri and later helped create Youth Vote '94, which registered and educated students and mobilized student voting.

His most recent battles in the Capitol concern lowering student loan interest rates. Fishberg said he had to undertake a quick education on the financial issues behind student loans, grants and tax exemptions.

"It wasn't just the regular appropriations process," he said. "But it was a full-scale battle for education that was going on in Congress. So I was really thrown into the deep end."

Fishberg said the lack of financial commitment to higher education is due in part to the need for Congress to balance their budgets and pay back campaign interests.

"It's an incredibly complex thing with a lot of different interests," he said. "Just having a few people there that represent solely the interests of students is absolutely critical."

When the 104th Congress proposed cutting back federal financial aid to students, a coalition was formed among educational associations, student groups and faculty to raise the roar of student protest.

"We had a common interest to protect federal financial aid,"

Fishberg said.

The Alliance to Save Student Aid employed lobbying tactics to ensure they were given a hearing on the budget, and students were present to voice their concerns.

The alliance hired a public relations firm to help market its message to Congress and conducted polling to determine what kind of education was needed to inform the representatives and senators.

"We wanted to draw broad lines of defense around student aid," he said.

The massive mobilization worked. During the 1995-96 session, Congress added \$3 billion in funding instead of the original \$30 billion in proposed cuts to higher education.

"We changed the terms of the debate," he said. "After the Reauthorization of Higher Education act passed, lawmakers realized and said 'We're not going to get into a big fight with students and schools, but work with students and negotiate.'"

For student leaders, advocating for student causes during college is an important stepping stone.

"For student activism and student organizing — you can start to realize the stuff is important to do in school," he said. "That doesn't stop when you graduate. You continue to be motivated by the same things."

Fishberg said students have become a political force, and he

doesn't expect Congress to propose any massive cuts to higher education in the next session.

"But there is still a death by thousands of little cuts to bleed us to death," he said.

Student lobbyists

Student leaders are needed to represent student concerns in Congress.

On March 12, the ASUO and United States Student Association are sending 12 University students to Washington to participate in the association's legislative conference and lobby day.

C.J. Gabbe, ASUO Federal Affairs Coordinator and event organizer, said he believes it's even more powerful for students to lobby through larger national organizations.

Gabbe said lobbying or advocating at the national level requires better preparation. Professional advocates such as Fishberg, the Oregon Student Association, USSA and USPIRG are needed to stay on top of current issues and educate at the national level, he said.

"It has a huge effect," Gabbe said. "Students from this campus can't be there every day, but through him we are."

For groups such as the College Democrats, networking is an important element in advancing student needs. The group meets with local representatives such as U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) every so often.

Having a political affiliation can

be an influencing factor.

"It lets them know you're for real," said Jed McGuire, public relations coordinator for the campus chapter of the College Democrats. "It shows you've taken time to sign up and show allegiance and loyalty."

Jennifer Noble, chairwoman of the College Democrats, said she tries to do indirect lobbying by setting students up with internships with Democratic leaders. She is currently the office manager for Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

"What better way to have a say in the process than to be a part of it," she said.

For Jonathan Collegio, state chairman of the College Republicans, meeting with legislators can be effective.

When House Bill 3644 was in the state Legislature, Collegio spoke with several Republican legislators and helped swing some votes, he said.

"It's obvious the Republican legislators know where I'm coming from — I'm not some cookie lefty," Collegio said.

The future

The next long-term battle for protecting student rights may lay ahead.

"New things are happening — advances and better technology have potential pitfalls," Fishberg said. "Students need to be involved with issues. Not only on campus but beyond your campus and beyond your state."

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