

Koch on Koch

Tyro city commissioner speaks out on the homeless, gay rights, anti-gay violence, and his agenda priorities.

B Y W C M c R A E

Bob Koch will replace Margaret Strachan on the Portland City Commission on January 12. Koch, a former police lieutenant with the Portland Police Bureau, defeated neighborhood activist Strachan in a race not determined until absentee ballots were counted. McRae interviewed Commissioner-elect Koch last month in his new City Hall office.

You have been described by an insider as "a wild card." What does this mean to you? Nobody knows where you will fit in the traditional alliances of city government.

I think that we are going to surprise a lot of people. In every day and in every way, I am going to seek to bring people in together in cooperation; people who have been separated by barriers. I will constantly seek to overcome those barriers and try to bring together people who might not have worked together cooperatively in the past.

What will happen to Margaret Strachan's Central City Plan?

That will be determined at budget time. I don't give it a great deal of hope. Primarily because there is no plan. We also have to face up to reality about budget resources. In 1987 we are going to go through a comprehensive land use review. That in essence is going to shape our future, and take the place of the Central City Plan.

During the election you were widely seen as "anti-downtown." What do you say to those people who live downtown, or who have an interest in keeping downtown a priority?

We have had a dynamic downtown plan, which generated tremendous input, and it was badly needed. But it has been essentially completed. Some felt that we had to make a good thing better. But when you make profound changes, you have to have a resting time to shore up loose blocks in the foundation. Policies were adopted that are destroying the first policy, what we have gained. By this, I mean the centralization of social services downtown. We are dealing with certain kinds of social services downtown which have unfortunately been destructive of the economic and living environment. We need to review the social services program we've got. We need to develop a social services plan that will protect the development of downtown.

What aspect of social services are you referring to?

The centralization of social services downtown. We allowed to stay in that place [downtown], the area of profound economic development, something that contradicts our previous investment. That is [programs that have] a magnetic attraction to alcoholics, the skid row kind of thing. We still maintain a magnetic attraction to transients, the economically displaced, the mentally disenfranchised. Because of that, we have certain kinds of establishments downtown which then provide kinds of victims, and crime follows victims. The atmosphere is conducive to that kind of thing.

Where do you propose to move those social services?

I'm not advocating specifically where to move them. The vast majority of our community does not support what is going on. And it has a very strong destructive impact on people and neighborhoods. Instead of force-feeding a plan down the throats of a community, we need as a community to say, 'We have social services problems, there are certain social services needs. We are a loving community. What is the best way to address the needs of those people,

which we can all support.' As a result, we will see more caring and sharing than ever before.

There has been an increase in anti-gay violence nationwide. Do you think violence against gays is a problem in Portland?

Assaultive behavior should not be tolerated for any citizen. As a policeman, I have found that certain groups of people tend not to report as much as others. I have worked in black communities and poor white communities and they tend not to report crime as much as an upper middle class community. The gay community also under-reports. It is an unfortunate fact that many gay people live a duality of lives. They feel a need to keep the straight world and the gay world separate. If they become victimized, then by reporting the crime, they are revealing a world that they don't want a lot of people to know about. That is an unfortunate thing. And police records are not a terribly confidential thing.

It's also fear of police, isn't it? Anti-gay violence has often been overlooked, or condoned, by the police.

There's truth in that. I would work in every way to deal with it. I have taught sensitivity training, to teach the uniqueness of every individual. You need to be sensitive to do good cop work. You don't have to completely embrace lifestyles to be sensitive to what those people are going through. The police should treat them as unique human beings who have made choices, whether they're free to make them or whether they're compelled to make them. Police officers should be truly professional, and must serve all the people without value judgements.

The ACLU will sponsor a statewide gay rights bill in 1987. The City Commission will be asked for a vote of support for the bill. Would you vote in favor of supporting the bill?

When I see a bill, I'll decide if I can support it.

Do you have theoretical or practical problems supporting gay rights?

I'd have to look at the content of a bill. I feel akin to the ACLU because I'm a strong constitutionalist. I'd have to balance it against my elected charge and responsibility.

You would feel the same way if it were a city-wide gay rights bill?

I'd have to look at the bill and ask, 'What is it that we're trying to legislate?' I don't take legislation lightly.

Margaret Strachan was widely seen as a friend to gays and minorities, and represented a women's agenda on the commission. The first reaction to your election is that you represent a disenfranchisement of concern about these issues. Do you offer any assurances to gay and lesbian voters, or to feminist voters?

It depends what the issues are. My wife is a professional, I was raised in a single parent family where my mother worked and struggled. I'm very strong on supporting equal pay for equal work. I'm very strong on supporting equal pay for equal work. I'm supportive of a lot of issues that would appeal to most people, whether they're gays or feminists or not. I can't support the entire feminist agenda. But there are many parts of the feminist agenda I can support, but we have to take the issues one by one. I want everyone to feel free in terms of access. That door will never be closed to anybody, period. There will always be respect, and accountability. You'll never find me talking out of one side of my mouth and doing another. I'll take things issue by issue. I'll always explain my decision. I won't make a decision in a knee-jerk kind of way. I need all the help in arriving at those decisions as possible. That's why the door is always open. I'm a public servant, elected to

serve all the people, regardless of who voted for me.

I don't want to give anyone false hopes that I'm going to be spending my time on secular issues. There are commonly shared value needs of our community that have to be addressed. I'd rather solve a problem that impacts on everyone in the community, than spend a great deal of time chasing secular issues down the path and

not solve anything. It's a matter of how you devote your time and resources effectively to support that widespread people's agenda. You can't accomplish everything for everybody. The shared needs are the priority. I'd like to think that a measure of our success in the future would be that the single largest issue facing us, is where to put bike paths. We're a long way from that. ●

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