

Gay rights lobby day at the State Legislature

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BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Since the passage of Measure 8 in November, the fight for lesbian and gay rights has moved from the voting booths to the legislative halls. A handful of bills on issues ranging from gay-bashing to HIV-testing have been introduced in the 1989 Oregon legislature.

But many legislators, having watched the divisive and emotional campaigns on both sides of Measure 8, now flinch from any measure that touches the issue of sexual orientation. Sen. Shirley Gold (D-Portland) told a small group of gay rights activists at the state capitol last month.

"The feeling we're dealing with after the Measure 8 campaign with regard to both sides is: why don't you just go away and leave us alone," Gold said.

The gay rights lobby day came on the heels of a lobby day by the Oregon Citizens' Alliance, the group that sponsored Measure 8, a repeal of Gov. Neil Goldschmidt's executive order banning discrimination against lesbians and gays in state hiring and services.

If the turnout at the gay rights lobby day was indicative of community interest in legislation affecting gays and lesbians, then the community has some work to do. The event was barely publicized, but could have been worthwhile; the participants — all 20 of them — got a solid mini-civics course and a rundown of this term's pertinent bills. They are:

HB 2364. This bill, proposed by Multnomah County District Attorney Michael D. Schrank, essentially makes gay-bashing a crime. What it actually does is add "sexual orientation" to the usual list of characteristics — race, color, religion, and national origin — in an anti-intimidation law. This 1981 law says that tampering with someone's property, threatening physical injury, or physically harassing them on the basis of any of those listed characteristics is a class-A misdemeanor. If two or more persons act together to intimidate an individual, the crime becomes a class-C felony.

When this bill came before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Corrections, most members balked.

"It is clear that this has frightened a lot of people," said Stevie Remington, executive director of the Oregon ACLU. "There are a lot of people who do not want to get near the words, 'sexual orientation.'"

The solution: Rep. Kevin Mannix (D-Salem) came up with amendments that dropped the buzz-words 'sexual orientation' and instead said it is a crime to intimidate someone on the basis of her or his status in the community, opinion, or beliefs. This language, presumably, would cover gays and lesbians as well as others who may be targets of intimidation. But Remington said the ACLU believes the wording is so vague that it could not pass muster in court.

One remote possibility, Remington said, would be to persuade the state Senate to pass a version of the bill including the words "sexual orientation;" the discrepancy would then be hammered out in a conference committee. "It's very difficult to see how we could pull this off," she said.

HB 2311. The foster-care bill. This is the measure that has ignited the most ire in the lesbian and gay community, although lobbyists predict it will not even receive a hearing. Still, its language and its sponsor, the OCA, carries echoes of the "Yes on 8" campaign. As a document, the bill is an interesting piece; it broadly defines "homosexual" as someone who "engages in, desires to engage in or intends to engage in homosexual acts."



HB 2709. This measure would strike a point in favor of confidentiality with respect to AIDS. It would prohibit real estate brokers from disclosing to new buyers that a previous occupant of the property was infected or died from AIDS.

HJR 32. This measure, a proposed amendment to the state constitution, would deny state funding for abortions. Because the federal government no longer funds abortions, state money is the only public money available in Oregon for poor women to have abortions. The success of this measure, as well as two that would restrict minors' access to abortion, depends in part on timing. If the Supreme Court hears the Webster v. Reproductive Health Services case — which could result in turning abortion regulation back to individual states — before the end of the session in Salem, abortion opponents will gain momentum here and elsewhere. With abortion rights on the line nationally, "the climate is very hostile," said Holly Pruet, lobbyist for the Women's Rights Coalition.

SB 631. The ubiquitous gay rights bill, this time sponsored by the Oregon Lesbian and Gay Action Network (OLGA). This measure, similar to HB 2325, which failed to get out of the House Judiciary Committee in 1987, would prohibit discrimination in employment, housing or public accommodation based on sexual orientation.

"We don't have any expectation at all that this will pass both houses," said Remington. "However, we expect it to receive a full hearing," which gives citizens the chance to educate legislators and the public with their testimony. The problem, as always, with gathering votes on this bill is one of courage and political risk. While legislators may say privately that they support it, few will go on record with a "yes" vote unless they're assured of enough company to pass the measure.

Still, "it's important to keep lobbying and pushing the information to help people get over their prejudices," said Remington.

SB 606 would require reporting and record-keeping of hate-crimes based on sexual orientation, as well as on race, color, religion, or national origin. Last May, the US House of Representatives passed a similar bill requiring the Justice Department to collect statistics on such crimes, but the Senate failed to get the bill to the floor.

"It should not be difficult to achieve passage of that bill," said Gold. A hearing on it is scheduled for April 6.

SB 827 would require positive HIV test results to be released to all health care providers who come into contact with the individual who is infected. Another AIDS-related bill, HB 2435, sponsored by the Oregon Medical Association, would allow mandatory HIV-testing for people whose blood or body fluid came into contact with at-risk emergency or medical employees, at the request of those employees.

"We are taking a position at this time that they should not mandate any testing," said Remington of the ACLU. "It doesn't really do anything to help the person who's exposed." •

How It All Works

A bill is introduced on the floor of the state House or Senate. From there, it goes to committee, where it may be amended and voted out, or may languish at the bottom of the agenda. From committee, the measure would return for debate and voting to the floor of the chamber in which it started.

If the House and Senate approve different versions of the same bill, a conference committee will try to draft a compromise version. Once both houses have approved a bill, it goes to the governor for signature or veto, or to the people in the form of a ballot measure.

Because most of the gritty work — the amendments, the arguments, the persuasion — happens in committee, that is the best time to lobby legislators about a measure. You can find out who's scheduled to hear what by calling 1-800-332-2313, the number for information on bill status. The Women's Rights Coalition, the

ACLU, and other organizations also keep tabs on pertinent bills.

How can you affect this process? Write letters, make phone calls, drive to Salem and chat with your representative and senator. The WRC and the ACLU can give you tips on how to do it, but common sense remains a good guide. Practice what you want to say, offer to leave some supporting written materials and keep the meeting brief, no more than five or ten minutes. If you write, a personal, original letter carries more clout than a carbon copy of one sent by every member of a group.

Joint Legislative Guides containing the names, phone numbers and committee assignments of each legislator are available from the Distribution Center at the capitol. The toll-free number to contact legislators and committees is 1-800-327-7389. •

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(Insert Representative/Senator Name)

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Hedy Rijken (D)	H-287	378-8040	4
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Delna Jones (R)	H-385	378-8857	6
Ted Calouri (R)	H-381	378-8876	7
Mary Alice Ford (R)	H-378	378-8858	8
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Tom Mason (D)	H-280	378-8826	11
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