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local news

Taking the initiative

After years of reacting to ballot measures, a new group
ponders going proactive

by Inga Sorensen

After years of reacting to initiatives sponsored by the Oregon Citizens Alliance, the head of a new human rights group says her organization is pondering a proactive measure that would prohibit Oregon's initiative process from being used to deny basic human rights to Oregonians that are currently guaranteed by the state Bill of Rights.

"It's certainly not out of the question," says Julie Davis, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, formerly the No on 13 Committee and Support Our Communities PAC. No on 13 was the most widely recognized organization to campaign against Ballot Measure 13, the proposed state constitutional amendment that Oregon voters rejected last year by a vote of 51-49 percent; while SOC PAC was created to counter the slew of local initiatives targeting gay men and lesbians that have been considered across the state during the past two years.

Unlike those short-lived organizations, both of which were specifically created to defeat particular ballot measures, Basic Rights Oregon will be a year-round, long-term operation—much like its nemesis, the OCA, a full-time entity that builds support for its cause during both on and off election years.

According to its mission statement, Basic Rights Oregon strives "to build a movement to advance and protect democratic freedoms and civil and human rights; to build the broadest possible coalition to counter the activities of groups such as the Oregon Citizens Alliance [and] to defeat attempts to deny basic rights through the electoral process."



Julie Davis

"Our goal is to out-educate, out-organize and out-vote the OCA," says Davis, who was the campaign manager for No on 13. "We intend to do that by connecting with recognized opinion leaders in local communities, and by employing a house-meeting strategy which will enable us to connect with citizens throughout the state."

Davis says Basic Rights Oregon, which held its official kick-off earlier this month, recently sponsored five house meetings in Washington County. An estimated 65 people turned out for the gatherings, at which participants were asked to make a pledge that they will always vote against the OCA's anti-human rights measures. They were also asked to pledge financial support to the group.

Davis says because Basic Rights Oregon evolved from No on 13 and SOC-PAC, it has an established donor, volunteer and organizational base. She hopes to tap into the 20,000-member donor network that contributed to those groups and mobilize their 5,000 volunteers. She further says hundreds of religious and community groups, labor organizations, professional associations, and public officials—including Gov. John Kitzhaber and U.S. Reps. Elizabeth Furse, Ron Wyden and Peter DeFazio—have already endorsed Basic Rights Oregon's overall mission statement.

One monumental philosophical and strategic break from campaigns of the past, however, is Basic Rights Oregon's serious consideration of

whether to place its own initiative before voters.

The OCA is attempting to place initiatives on the 1996 ballot. It cost nearly \$2 million to defeat Ballot Measure 13, and Davis says it could cost as much as \$4 million to run a proactive and a reactive campaign simultaneously.

"The advantage of having a counter initiative is that it allows you to feel more positive because you're not simply reacting" explains William Lunch, political commentator for Oregon Public Broadcasting. "The disadvantage of having your own initiative is that you have to get yes votes instead of no votes. If a voter steps into the voting booth and sees a series of complicated ballot questions—the way we do here in Oregon—they're likely to become confused. Voters who are confused or uncertain typically vote no because it's safer."

The wording of the draft initiative reads, in part: "The initiative power reserved to the people... does not include the power to repeal or limit rights and liberties guaranteed by the Oregon Bill of Rights.... Those rights and liberties include, but are not limited to, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Assembly and Freedom of Religion.

No ballot title shall be issued nor shall an election be held on any initiative petition if the measure proposed by the petition includes matters that fall outside the scope of the initiative power." The initiative would be a proposed state constitutional amendment.

A similar measure is currently being considered by state lawmakers. Senate Joint Resolution 39, which was introduced by Sen. Peter Sorenson (D-Eugene), would allow the Oregon Constitution's Bill of Rights to be amended only by the

referendum process, not by the initiative process.

An initiative consists of a procedure whereby a certain percentage of voters may, by petition, propose that a law or constitutional amendment be placed on the ballot for voter approval or rejection. This technique circumvents the legislature. A referendum, meanwhile, allows questions to be submitted to voters on the judgment of the legislature. Unable to push its measures through the state Legislature, the OCA has effectively used the state's initiative process to further its agenda. However, many believe the OCA has not only used the process but abused it as well.

"It's essential that the initiative process not be misused by one group of people attempting to take away the basic rights of others. No one's basic rights should be so vulnerable to a vote," says Sorenson. "Aside from the obvious moral reasons for SJR 39, Oregon stands to save many millions of dollars in what it costs to bring an improper initiative to a vote, and then to pay for the court challenges to an initiative intended to erode the protections guaranteed in the Bill of Rights."

To the surprise of some, SJR 39 received a hearing in the Republican-controlled Senate. Further movement on the bill is considered unlikely, however.

For more information about Basic Rights Oregon, call 222-6151.