

POLITICAL PROFILE

A front row seat

After three terms in Salem, Gail Shibley is looking toward a position on the Portland City Council

by Inga Sorensen

Terry Bean sounds like a proud father when he recalls the first time he saw state Rep. Gail Shibley in action.

"It was just a couple of weeks after she took office. I went down to Salem and snuck into a committee meeting that she was in. They were discussing some minute and obscure details of a bill dealing with surveyors. When I heard Gail talk I was knocked off my feet. She spoke so eloquently and knew more than anyone on the committee, including the chairman."

It's no wonder the well-connected Democratic booster, who is co-founder of the national organizations Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund and Human Rights Campaign Fund, sits on Shibley's finance committee—an entity which was formed not to raise funds for another state legislative run, but rather to attract money for Shibley's bid to join the Portland City Council, which she announced Sept. 11.

"When I saw Gail at that committee meeting, I was so proud that she was representing our community," says Bean, a Lake Oswego businessman. "While the Portland City Council has traditionally been great on gay and lesbian issues, there is no substitute for having one of our own with a seat at the table."

The seat Shibley wants to fill is that of outgoing commissioner Mike Lindberg, who announced in June that he was retiring after serving 16 years on the Portland City Council.

The 37-year-old Shibley, as many of you know, made history in 1991 by becoming Oregon's first openly lesbian (or gay) state legislator, when the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners appointed her to fill the District 12 seat vacated by Phil Keisling, who was appointed secretary of state.

Though she was just 32, the Portland Democrat wowed many Capitol colleagues and political observers—on both sides of the aisle—with her smarts, straightforwardness and work ethic. Undaunted by her minority party status, Shibley, a pragmatic progressive, introduced family leave and environmental legislation within the first several weeks in office. Many felt she was a rising star who might one day become House speaker.

"Gail is a brilliant political strategist," says state Rep. Kate Brown (D-Portland). In 1991, Brown, who is openly bisexual, was a lobbyist for the Oregon Women's Rights Coalition. "She is terrific at setting goals and getting the work done. If one avenue doesn't work, she'll come up with another plan. That's the way she is."

Many say that during the beginning of her legislative career, Shibley was remarkably composed and focused given the fact she was very much in the public spotlight: One must remember that Shibley took office at the same time the Oregon Citizens Alliance announced its plans to pass Ballot Measure 9. Unlike today, that was a period in state history when the issue of gay and lesbian rights was buried far beneath the public consciousness. Four years later, Oregon has been

through two rigorous statewide anti-sexual-minority-rights campaigns, and four other lesbian, gay and bisexual legislators now serve in the state Legislature.

"Gail opened the door for everyone else by showing that you could be openly gay and be elected to public office," says Bean. "She broke that barrier for others."

One of those who directly benefited from the breaking of the barrier is state Rep. George Eighmey (D-Portland) who became the second openly gay lawmaker when he was appointed to his seat in 1993. He recounts that all was not smooth at the beginning.

"I remember getting a call from a [legislative colleague] when I first took office. This person asked me whether I was getting along with Gail. I said that I thought so," explains Eighmey, a 54-year-old attorney who lives in Southeast Portland. "This person said there seemed to be some tension between the two of us that had to do with the fact that I was now getting the public attention [due to being openly gay].

Soon after that I got a call from Gail—whom I had only recently met—saying that she had heard these rumors and wanted to get together for lunch. We did, and things have been great ever since."

He adds, "That's the thing about Gail—if she thinks there's a problem, she deals with it head on."

Though she has received accolades for her legislative work and diligence, Shibley was tagged as a disappointment in a recent *Willamette Week* article which evaluated the performance of Oregon lawmakers during the 1995 session. The annual roundup, which quoted anonymous political sources, suggested Shibley was distracted and disinterested in her legislative work, due in part to the fact that she was, after three terms in the Legislature, still in the minority party.

Says Eighmey: "I think the *Willamette Week* article did a major disservice to Gail and totally overlooked the fact she has matured tremendously when it comes to politics. To get anything done given the makeup of the Legislature, you have to

do behind-the-scenes work, and that's what Gail really focused on this session."

Ironically, Eighmey suggests that Shibley worked perhaps too privately two years ago on House Bill 3500—compromise legislation which prohibited enforcement of local anti-gay-rights laws.

During the final days of the contentious 1993 session, sexual-minority-rights backers were pushing an omnibus gay rights bill, as well another barring discrimination based on sexual orientation; both were ultimately killed, and HB 3500 emerged as the only survivor from that ugly scuffle.

"There was a sense that Gail came up with that alternative without input from anybody else, and I think the wording could have been better if more people were involved," he says. "But since then, she's really been open to working with all sorts of people and sharing ideas. I think she's secure enough now to do that."

Shibley responds: "That whole process was complex, and HB 3500 was not my idea. Some House Re-

publicans had understood the need to stop the OCA, but they feared the consequences of moving [a gay rights bill]. They talked privately with me about this, and requested total secrecy. It was like a John Grisham novel, where I had secret meetings at Willamette University under the clock tower. We couldn't be seen together. You have to understand this was the climate I was working in."

As for her work this session, Shibley says she's proud of her record, most notably the passage of a law that makes viatical settlement companies that do business in Oregon more accountable.

As for why she wants to leave the Oregon Legislature for the Portland City Council, she says: "Changing the world means changing things block by block. That's truly where the action is."

Shibley is a program manager for the city's Traffic Management Bureau. In that capacity, she is responsible for the bicycling program and the community traffic safety program, which includes the "For Kid's Sake/Slow Down" program that

encourages the public to drive cautiously in areas where children congregate, particularly near schools.

She believes her job has given her insights into local government that will make her an effective commissioner.

"I have a front row seat when it comes to watching and experiencing how city government works," she says. "In my position I have to implement the City Council's policies, and that includes handling budgets, allocating funds and providing services."

Now Shibley—who would be Portland's first openly gay or lesbian commissioner—wants to create policy. As one of four commissioners, she would oversee a particular department, such as public utilities, which would include managing the Bureau of Water Works and the Bureau of Environmental Services, among others.

Making the switch from representative to commissioner would expand Shibley's constituency more than 10-fold. House District 12 includes about 40,000 constituents, most of whom reside on the city's west side. As commissioner, a \$68,000-per-year post, she would represent all of the estimated 495,000 Rose City residents (75 percent of the city's population resides on the east side).

As a city commissioner, Shibley also risks falling out of favor with traditional allies such as labor unions, because she would be in the more adversarial role of manager.

Whether Shibley's sexual orientation will come into play remains to be seen. "I don't know if it will overtly be an issue, or if we'll see coded language like 'gay rights activist' which implies I'm a single-issue candidate," says Shibley. "We'll have to see."

One area where she hopes it will make a positive difference is fund raising. "I think it's important there be an openly gay member of the City Council, but it's going to be a real challenge," says Shibley, who has sent out a letter to supporters requesting campaign contributions equivalent to 10 percent of the recipient's average monthly income.

She speculates she may have to raise \$200,000 for the May primary election, while others have suggested the more imposing figure of \$500,000. (Shibley estimates the most she ever raised for a House run was \$175,000.)

"I can make a difference," says the lifelong Oregonian, who attended the University of Oregon, where she studied international relations, before working as an aide to U.S. Rep. Jim Weaver for six years.

The only other announced candidate for the position is lawyer Jim Francesconi, but others are expected to come forth in the near future.



Gail Shibley

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