

Evening things up

Multnomah County commissioners amend and repeal sexual orientation measures

by Inga Sorensen

The Multnomah County Board of Commissioners—which in 1992 became Oregon's first public employer to approve domestic partnership coverage for its employees—is set to amend a county personnel policy to include sexual orientation.

The amendment, which is expected gain easy approval Oct. 26, will allow unclassified employees who believe they've been discriminated against in personnel matters due to their sexual orientation the right to air their grievances before the county's merit council. (Unclassified employees are those not represented by a bargaining unit.)

According to Maria Rojo de Steffey, staff assistant to Multnomah County Commission Chair Beverly Stein, the merit council is composed of citizens who hear discrimination claims made by unclassified employees. The council in turn makes recommendations to commissioners regarding further personnel actions (such as reinstatement for someone who may have lost his or her job).

Currently the merit council hears claims brought by employees who feel a personnel action has been taken against them due to their "race, religion, sex, age, marital status, national origin, physical or mental handicap or political affiliation." The amendment will also change "handicap" to "disability."

Meanwhile, in a 4-0 vote, commissioners have repealed a resolution that bars conference travel

by employees to places where antigay measures have been approved.

"Back when the board initially passed the resolution [in 1992], only Springfield, [Ore.], and Colorado had approved antigay measures," says Rojo de Steffey. "We felt it was important to do that [boycott those communities] back then."

But she says the dramatic increase in communities that have approved antigay measures has posed a difficulty for "the three or four county employees each year" who may need to travel to a conference.

And, says Rojo de Steffey, if there were a more "global effort" underway supporting the prohibition, it would be different. "But right now, county employees feel like they are the only ones being affected by the ban," she says. "They felt like they just were not having much impact on those communities."

Rojo de Steffey says an employee task force that was created in 1994 to "develop a strategy on how Multnomah County can best protect and advance the civil rights of all individuals" received input about the two actions from lesbian and gay rights advocates, including representatives from the Northwest Speak Out Project and the Rural Organizing Project; gay and lesbian county employees; the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission; and the East Metro Human Rights Coalition.

While they repealed the travel resolution, commissioners also affirmed their commitment to providing equal rights for all county employees.

ensure that all Americans without exception may live free from discrimination."

"We are honored that Governor Roberts will be serving on our board," says HRCF Executive Director Elizabeth Birch. "She brings her wealth of experience and stature to a gifted and talented group of volunteers that guide the policies and financial health of HRCF."

Roberts served as Oregon's chief executive from 1991 to January 1995. During her tenure, she was an outspoken opponent of the Oregon Citizens Alliance and its numerous antigay-rights initiatives. She joined with retired U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) as co-chair of HRCF's Americans Against Discrimination project in 1994, which helped defeat antigay campaigns in 10 states.

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Roberts continues human rights work

Former Oregon Gov. Barbara Roberts continues to actively work for gay and lesbian civil rights.

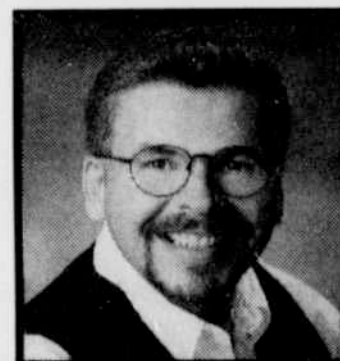
Last month she joined the board of directors of the Human Rights Campaign Fund, a national gay and lesbian rights organization based in Washington, D.C.

"I am looking forward to participating in the leadership of HRCF," says Roberts, who is currently the director of the Program for Senior Executives in State and Local Government at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. "We must enlist the support of more and more nongay citizens to join this effort to

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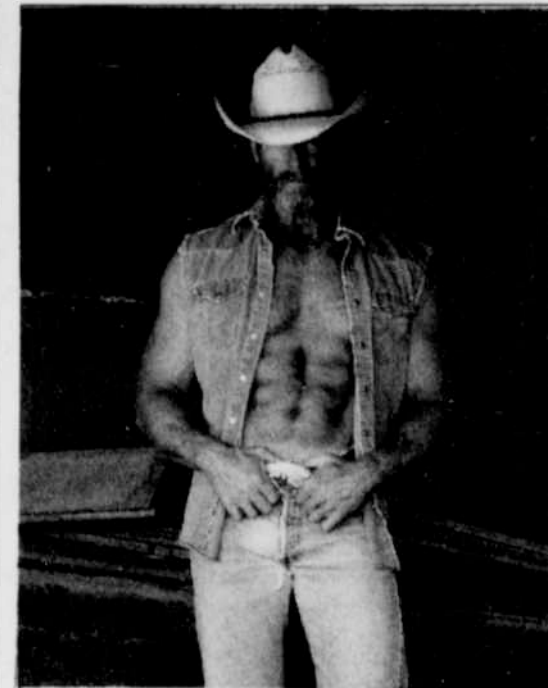


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