

Building a bridge

State Rep. Chuck Carpenter surprises many by making a conservative alliance

by Inga Sorensen

Gordon Smith has said it is a "special right"—and one which he opposes—for people to receive legal protections from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Gordon Smith reportedly vows to vigorously oppose any attempt to provide legal recognition to same-sex couples who wish to marry. Gordon Smith has publicly welcomed an endorsement from the Oregon Citizens Alliance, a group which many feel has created a climate of intolerance that has left an ugly mark on the state and its people. This is the man that openly gay state Rep. Chuck Carpenter wants for United States senator.

"What can I say? It really comes down to the fact that I'm more comfortable with Gordon as a person than I am with Norma [Paulus]," says Carpenter, a first-term Republican legislator whose district covers portions of Washington, Multnomah and Columbia counties.

The 33-year-old former Nike employee surprised many within the gay and political establishments by his recent endorsement of Smith (R-Pendleton), a social and fiscal conservative who is running for the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Bob Packwood.

Smith, a multimillionaire businessman and state Senate president, is vying for the GOP nomination along with Norma Paulus, the state schools superintendent, Jack Roberts, Oregon's labor commissioner, and lesser known candidates. The race for the Republican nomination is widely held to be a two-person contest between Smith and Paulus.

"Chuck showed up at Norma's [U.S. Senate campaign] kick-off [in late September], and he was very enthusiastic about it. Chuck told her if he could help in any way to just let him know," says Paulus spokeswoman K.C. Cowan. "His endorsement of Gordon was a shock. I mean sure, Gordon might be a pleasant guy, but this is a U.S. Senate race, and let's take a look at his stand on the issues."

According to Cowan, as a United States senator Paulus would co-sponsor federal legislation barring employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. She adds that Paulus supports civil rights protections—at all levels of government—prohibiting discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations; Paulus opposes the military ban on openly gay and lesbian servicemembers; and, Cowan says, Paulus supports benefits coverage for the partners of gay and lesbian employees. (Cowan says Paulus is still formulating her position on the issue of same-sex marriage.)

Unlike Smith, Paulus has publicly chastised the OCA for its divisive campaigns. In October she attended Right to Privacy's Lucille Hart Dinner, a major fund-raiser for the gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization.

Not surprisingly, Smith was a no-show at that event, and he did not even bother responding to

RTP's candidate survey. (Smith campaign manager Dan Lavey did not return our phone calls.) Smith says he did not support 1992's Ballot Measure 9 or 1994's Measure 13; he has said he opposes the OCA's latest anti-gay initiatives.

"Gordon may be on the right when it comes to social issues, but I wouldn't call him a bigot," says Carpenter, who is thought to be a social liberal and a fiscal conservative. "Gordon has always been very accepting of me."

Carpenter says he was flattered when Smith included him in negotiations last session over pressing legislative issues, most notably funding for light rail, which both men supported.

"Gordon pulled me into a lot of stuff when he didn't have to," says Carpenter. "He called me for an endorsement. Norma never did."

When asked whether his endorsement may be viewed as a self-serving act, Carpenter says: "I'm sure 90 percent of the gay community will feel like I've sold them out, but that's the way it goes. I like Gordon. He's a decent person."

"You often find amateurs in state legislatures. Maybe it is just a matter of Chuck Carpenter liking Gordon Smith, but

there could be something else going on," says Bill Lunch, a political science professor at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

"Gordon Smith has lots and lots of money, some of which he may contribute to Carpenter's re-election campaign," speculates Lunch. "It also may be an attempt by Carpenter to ward off a primary challenge from someone on the right. Carpenter may be saying to potential right-wing Republican challengers: 'Hey look, I'm a conservative, too,' by throwing his support behind a conservative candidate and not the moderate."

RTP has endorsed Paulus in the GOP primary because she is supportive of sexual minority rights as well as reproductive freedoms for women.

"Gordon Smith doesn't support either," says RTP executive director Barry Pack.

In fact, Smith has thrown his support behind a new OCA initiative that would bar late-term abortions except when the woman's life is threatened.

"Those are two bottom-line issues for Right to Privacy," says Pack. "We do not support Chuck's decision."

During the last election, RTP's political action committee, which contributes thousands of dollars to political candidates, endorsed both Carpenter and his Democratic rival, Jeanne Atkins. It was a very tight race, and the favorable nod from RTP could have pushed Carpenter over the top.

"Obviously [Carpenter's endorsement of Smith] will be something our board will discuss the next time we are deciding our endorsements," says Pack.

As for what Carpenter stands to gain if Smith is triumphant: "I'd be one of the few openly gay people who could walk into Gordon's office," he says.



Chuck Carpenter

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