

Brown-bagging with the gov

Representatives from a variety of lesbian and gay organizations met with Gov. Kitzhaber to discuss concerns

by Inga Sorensen

Members of the gay and lesbian community who recently attended a brown-bag chitchat with Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber say they are encouraged by the dialogue and hope it marks the first of many such meetings.

"I think it's historic, to the extent that here we have a sitting governor who has asked a number of people representing a variety of gay organizations for their input regarding serious issues facing the community and all of Oregon," says state Rep. George Eighmey (D-Portland), who was among the nearly two dozen representatives of the sexual minorities community who were invited to meet with Oregon's chief executive on Oct. 31 in Salem.

Among those in attendance were Julie Davis, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon; Barb Eichberger of Veterans for Human Rights; state Rep. Cynthia Wooten (D-Eugene); Right to Privacy Executive Director Barry Pack; the Rev. Roy Cole of Portland's Metropolitan Community Church; Portland Lesbian Community Project Executive Director LaVerne Lewis; Brian Marki of the Portland Area Business Association; and Terry Bean, the co-founder of the Human Rights Campaign (formerly known as the Human Rights Campaign Fund) and the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund.

"The governor has been meeting with members of several constituency groups since his inauguration. He's already met with people from the Hispanic and African American communities. He has plans to meet with members of the Asian community. These gatherings give him an opportunity to share his vision of the state with people," says Annabelle Jaramillo, the governor's citizens' representative.

According to attendees, Kitzhaber focused on four main topics—public safety; quality of life issues; the economy, jobs and education; and how to assist vulnerable citizens. On the flip side, participants shared with Kitzhaber their concerns about funding for HIV/AIDS and breast cancer treatment and research, teen suicide and youth issues, anti-discrimination legislation, and how to make state agencies more gay-friendly.

"I spoke about how we must be proactive and prepare for what may happen when the Amendment 2 ruling comes down," says MCC's Cole.

Amendment 2, an anti-gay-rights initiative approved by Coloradans in 1992, is currently before the U.S. Supreme Court. A ruling on the case is expected next summer.

"No matter what the decision is, there's a good chance there will be some negative reactions here in Oregon," says Cole. "I think we all need to prepare, and I believe the governor can help through the power of his words. I asked that he use inclusive language when he is traveling around

the state talking with citizens. I believe that can make a difference."

Says Jaramillo: "The governor feels that it is vital for all communities to come together. He believes that we should unite rather than tearing each other down. He wants to ensure that all people in Oregon be able to live free of fear and discrimination."

Julie Davis of Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide organization working against discriminatory initiatives, says, "My policy concern was how we can get out of this defensive situation and pass anti-discrimination legislation. What gave me hope and encouragement was that the governor seemed to want to help inform the public about the reality that it is still legal in most places in Oregon to discriminate against a person because of his or her sexual orientation."

Davis says that has been her organization's "biggest obstacle."

"Undoing the 'special rights' argument is not easy. The public just doesn't understand that you



Gov. John Kitzhaber

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can be fired for being gay or lose your home or children and not have any legal redress," she says. "If the governor can help shed light on that, it would help enormously."

Eighmey, meanwhile, says ideas were batted about regarding how to help sexual minority youth, a largely unrecognized and underserved population in Oregon, and how to make state agencies more gay-positive.

"We didn't come to any conclusions, of course, since this was the first meeting," he says. "I'm hoping we can use this as a starting point."

Like his gubernatorial predecessor, Barbara Roberts, Kitzhaber, also a Democrat, is heralded as extremely supportive of gay and lesbian civil rights. Currently, however, there is no agencieswide anti-discrimination policy covering sexual orientation, no openly gay or lesbian member of the governor's staff, and no benefits coverage for the domestic partners of state employees.

According to Jaramillo, Kitzhaber hopes to hold similar meetings with the sexual minorities community on a quarterly basis.

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