

local news

Is it a clash of philosophies or something else? As with so much in life, it depends on one's perspective.

"This isn't about money, because we've presented a proposal that would save the same amount while retaining our advocacy role," says Lowen Berman, chair of the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, which has been targeted for an overhaul that includes the discontinuation of its human rights advocacy and policy review functions.

MHRC, which is funded by both the city and Multnomah County, works to embrace the dignity of all people. It comprises 15 citizen volunteers, and sponsors anti-bigotry trainings and race-relation dialogues, as well as handling disability issues. The duties of the agency also include gathering information about civil and human rights issues, however, MHRC does not have the authority to investigate claims of possible civil rights violations, nor does it have enforcement powers.

In mid-March Portland City Commissioner Jim Francesconi, who oversees MHRC, unveiled a plan to slash the commission's budget and scope of responsibilities. Under the proposal MHRC would no longer be an independent bureau but rather a program of the Office of Neighborhood Associations. Its human rights advocacy role would be abolished, though it would still provide services to citizens and community groups. And MHRC's executive director position would be extinguished come next April, when Helen Cheek, the current executive director, retires.

Kevin Jeans-Gail, Francesconi's executive assistant, says the passage last November of Measure 47, a property tax limitation initiative, has forced local government to strip and streamline.

"We're doing this with all the bureaus, not just MHRC," he says. "We also have a city-county consolidation discussion going on. This is a time when people are re-examining what the role of government should be."

MHRC's budget this year is \$389,000. Forty percent of that comes from Multnomah County and the remaining 60 percent from the City of Portland. Francesconi has reportedly estimated the plan would result in a savings of \$80,000.

Jeans-Gail describes the MHRC plan as a "joint proposal" crafted by Francesconi and Commissioner Gretchen Miller Kafoury.

Kafoury, who says she has been a commission "supporter for many years," sent a March 9 letter to MHRC arguing, among other points, that numerous civil rights organizations now exist that can monitor and advocate for their respective communities. She further maintains, given current fiscal constraints, that a "small stand-alone bureau is not justifiable from either an administrative or program perspective."

Jeans-Gail estimates that 80 percent of MHRC's work will continue if the plan becomes reality.

It's the loss of that other 20 percent that upsets commission members.

Mission: Unpopular

MHRC members say the planned curtailment of their agency is not about saving money

by Inga Sorensen



Gretchen Kafoury

"We firmly believe government has a responsibility to advocate for human rights issues," says Berman. "There are many disenfranchised groups who don't have anyone advocating for them, which means they have no voice in public policy. Having a voice within government is a lot different than having one outside of government."

Since its establishment in 1992, MHRC has advocated for the poor, immigrants, farm workers and other groups that traditionally have had little political clout or say in government.

Among MHRC's more recent projects is the release of its "Report on Sexual Minority Youth," which in a nutshell found that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth often experience harassment, violence and discrimination in their schools, homes, churches, employment and use of social services.

MHRC created a task force designed to address the needs of sexual minority youth following a Sept. 10 commission meeting where Lanny Swerdlow, then owner of the now defunct City Nightclub, claimed Portland police and city and county officials were harassing and "illegally discriminating" against him and his club, which catered to sexual minority youth.

At the same time, the Governor's Task Force on Teen Suicide, Multnomah County and Mayor Vera Katz were seeking information on the status of sexual minority youth.

MHRC voted unanimously to create the task force, and its members met with sexual minority

youth from the metropolitan area via youth support groups, homeless shelters and schools.

The report subsequently recommended the establishment of school policies protecting sexual minority youth, and implored state and local governments to pass legislation extending civil rights protections to all sexual minorities.

Furthermore, the report called upon the City of Portland and Multnomah County work together with the private sector to provide a safe place for sexual minority youth.

In other related actions, MHRC voted to become a co-requester of Oregon ENDA, a statewide nondiscrimination employment bill, and last October it urged the inclusion of "transsexuals and other sexual minorities" in Portland's human rights ordinance.

That recommendation followed fact-finding hearings held last spring which were designed to assess the level of discrimination against those populations in Portland. The recommendation, which was forwarded to Kafoury, was rejected. (Kafoury did not respond to our inquiry for this story.) As for the queer youth report, MHRC member Nyla McCarthy, an out lesbian, says although 600 copies of the document have been distributed, there has been nary an acknowledgment from the mayor.

"She doesn't return our calls. We can't get meetings," she says. "She gave us a virtually impossible deadline to get the report done, but we still managed to pull it together."

MHRC has also questioned the practice of police intelligence gathering on political activists; reiterated to city officials its call for a civilian police review board; and took testimony "regarding unilateral abrogation by police, without notice, of community policing agreements," when it discovered there are no standards or oversight regarding such agreements.

"They want us to go away because we're needing them," says Greg Asher, an openly gay college professor who has served on MHRC for five years.

"We got somewhat involved in the City Nightclub controversy. While we didn't go to bat for Lanny, we did question whether the city was doing enough to assist sexual minority youth and whether the police partnership agreement had been violated," he says.

Cheek says she feels "caught in the middle" of the controversy. As a paid staffer who reports to a city commissioner while working closely with MHRC's citizen members, she blames the "inherent conflict" of the commission's structure and purpose.

After all, MHRC is a public agency charged with promoting and defending human rights. Yet if the commission criticizes local government for not doing enough toward that end, it is in essence biting the hand that feeds it.

According to Berman, MHRC has presented an alternative budget plan to city commissioners. It includes the same savings budgetwise, calls for the abolishment of the executive director post and supports sharing resources with ONA.

MHRC's counter measure states, in part: "Our proposal recognizes that sharing resources with ONA can be mutually beneficial. As citizens providing the requested leadership through these post-Measure 47 budget dilemmas, we also see our proposal [as] a 'win-win' situation for all parties. Service consolidation and enhancement can occur at a reduced cost—and citizens advocacy will continue to provide government with needed guidance and perspective."

It adds, "Conservative estimates of the value of citizen in-kind contributions to MHRC for the city and county for [fiscal year] 1996-97 place the dollar amount at \$66,000."

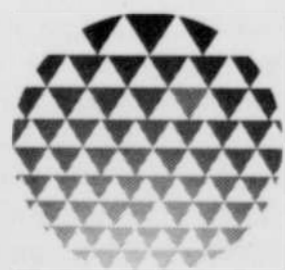
Under the plan, MHRC would maintain its status as an independent citizen-led entity and retain its advocacy and policy review/recommendation functions. Furthermore, it would set priorities and direct staff in the provision of services in partnership with ONA, the city commissioner in charge and the county chair.

Berman says he and some commission members recently met with representatives from Kafoury's and Francesconi's offices and ONA to ponder the proposal.

"We met their concerns as far as money and government efficiencies go," he says.

Jeans-Gail says his office's review of the proposal did not come to the same conclusion.

"We don't think the savings could possibly be the same," he says.



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