

local news

The head of an Oregon gay and lesbian rights group admits she has yet to be convinced it's a sound idea to launch a proactive initiative campaign.

"I'm not totally sold on the idea at this point," concedes Jean Harris, executive director of Basic Rights Oregon, a statewide grassroots group that would take a lead role in such an effort.

BRO recently kicked off a series of statewide community discussions aimed at getting a pulse on how others feel about promoting an initiative prohibiting employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The measure, which would be statutory in nature and not a constitutional amendment, would be proposed for the November 1998 ballot. Harris says proposal language was submitted to the Oregon secretary of state's office Aug. 29, but could be pulled and reworked at some point. Chief petitioners are Cheryl Perrin, senior vice president of public affairs for Fred Meyer, Inc., Ron Fortune, executive secretary treasurer of the Northwest Labor Council/AFL-CIO, and BRO co-chair McKinley Williams.

Washington voters will consider a similar initiative this November.

Oregon's first public dialogue was held Aug. 14 at Metropolitan Community Church of Portland. An estimated 85 people—mostly seasoned activists and politicians—turned out for the two-hour session.

Many expressed serious reservations about a proactive initiative, echoing sentiments detailed in a recent letter to BRO from Oregon Rep. George Eighmey, an openly gay Portland Democrat.

In that missive, Eighmey argued there was a "high probability" a pro-gay initiative would lose

Just do it?

Sexual minority rights activists in Oregon are pondering the pros and cons of legislative proactivity

by Inga Sorensen

and said the ramifications of such a loss could be severe.

"We run the risk of having the failure used against us for at least the next five to 10 years. Our true hope of passing [the Employment Nondiscrimination Act] lies within the Legislature," he wrote. "If an ENDA initiative fails, our legislative progress will be set back.... Those legislators who were moderately supportive of it in 1997 and those who might be lukewarm in supporting it in later years will have the excuse of saying 'the voters have spoken.'"

State Rep. Chuck Carpenter, an openly gay Republican from the Portland area, backed that sentiment at the mid-August meeting.

"If we lose, we won't be able to pass anything...for the next 10 to 15 years," said Carpenter, who played a major role in successfully maneuvering Oregon ENDA through the Republican-controlled House this past session. The bill was subsequently killed in the more heavily GOP-dominated Senate.

A loss at the ballot box would be used against gay and lesbian rights supporters "relentlessly," Carpenter added, to a round of applause.

Suzanne Pharr, staff organizer of the Lesbian Community Project, meanwhile, outlined potential positives of going proactive.

She said it was a way for gay rights backers to set the tone and frame the issue, rather than always being on the defensive.

Pharr also said the effort could provide the "spiritual reward of hope...of working for something instead of against something, working to win real improvements instead of to win the right to stay at the status quo."

Another benefit mentioned was the ability of a campaign to energize and strengthen the community, to increase progressive turnout—thereby helping supportive candidates—and to create momentum for other rights issues both at the ballot and in the Legislature.

Concerns, meanwhile, included fears an initiative effort would squeeze already tight resources, thus undermining fundraising efforts that could bolster gay-friendly candidates. The question of whether the majority should vote on the rights of the minority was also raised.

Some who harbor reservations—including

Proposal language was submitted to the Oregon secretary of state's office Aug. 29, but could be pulled and reworked at some point

Washington gay and lesbian rights activists plow ahead

Washington state gay and lesbian rights advocates are looking south for a little support.

"We've done mailings to raise money for Oregon when you were battling anti-gay rights measures there," says Jan Bianchi, executive director of Hands Off Washington, a statewide grassroots group heading up the proactive campaign to pass Initiative 677.

The measure seeks to bar employment discrimination based on sexual orientation statewide. It will appear on Washington's ballot this November.

In order to be victorious, Bianchi estimates the Yes on 677 campaign will need to pull in \$750,000. She says Hands Off Washington has

raised about half that amount as of August's end.

"I think we surprised a lot of people when we actually got this on the ballot. Many were thinking we simply wouldn't get enough signatures. Well, guess what? We did, and we're going to win this thing," she says.

Yes on 677 is currently coordinating voter registration and identification efforts, which will be followed by an education and media campaign.

According to Bianchi, support from national gay and lesbian rights organizations has been mixed thus far. She says the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has been generous with its campaign advice and assistance. The Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Campaign, meanwhile, has yet to commit any financial resources to the effort.

"But I'm on the phone with HRC a couple of hours a day making our case," says Yes on 677 campaign manager Mitch Fouché.

Money is coming in from other sources, however—but not without consequence.

A few weeks ago, Fred Meyer, Inc., donated \$10,000 to the Initiative 677 campaign. In response, the company has been flooded with calls from both proponents and opponents of the initiative.

According to the *Seattle Gay News*, Fred Meyer has received hate mail stating, in part, "this nation is teetering on the brink of moral collapse and we no longer support businesses that are becoming part of the problem." In addition to calling for an official boycott of Fred Meyer stores, the negative letters are filled with false assertions, such as "[Initiative 677] will force societal acceptance of homosexual conduct...giving special legal protections to their behavior."

Jenny Schlueter, executive assistant to Fred Meyer chair Bob Miller, tells *Just Out* company officials are not surprised by the reaction.

"It's bound to happen whenever you make a contribution like that," she says, adding that the negative feedback will in no way sway the company's backing of such issues in the future.

Bianchi, meanwhile, attended the Aug. 14 community meeting in Portland where Oregonians began mulling the possibility of launching their own initiative campaign.

"I didn't hear any concerns that I hadn't heard before in Washington state when we first began talking about doing this two years ago," she says. "Like you, we had been going to the Legislature for 22 years with a bill. In 1994, it came up one vote short of passage. Some activists said we should just focus on the Legislature. Well, the next session the bill wasn't even brought up in the House."

From the front lines of a new strategy Bianchi asks, "How long are you supposed to keep trying it that way?"

Inga Sorensen

Anyone wishing to donate to the Yes on 677 campaign may do so by sending a check to Hands Off Washington, 1122 E Pike St., Suite 532, Seattle, WA 98122.

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