

BENTON COUNTY LEADS THE WAY

A new anti-discrimination ordinance that includes trans people is an Oregon milestone by Inga Sorensen

It is one of those historic moments that passed with little fanfare.

"There's been no controversy. It's really quite amazing," notes Karuna Neustadt, president of After 8, a decade-old, Corvallis-based group that "works for political change for the lesbian, gay and bisexual communities in Benton and Linn counties."

Neustadt's enthusiasm is prompted by the July 1 passage of an anti-discrimination ordinance which includes, among a host of other categories, sexual orientation and gender identity. The latter explicitly encompasses transsexual and transgendered people.

By a 2-1 vote, the Benton County Board of Commissioners approved what is believed to be Oregon's first anti-discrimination ordinance which includes transsexual and transgendered people as a protected class.

The measure, which takes effect Aug. 14, covers the unincorporated areas of Benton County—rural spots like Kings Valley, North Albany, Alpine, Blodgett and Adair.

It does not cover the county's incorporated areas—its more populated sites like the cities of Corvallis, Philomath and Monroe—because, says Neustadt, the county does not have jurisdiction over incorporated cities.

"We hope that we will be just the first of many Oregon communities that include transsexual and transgendered persons in their anti-discrimination clauses," she says. "This is just the start. What we really need, however, are state and federal laws so we don't have to do this in such a piecemeal way."

The ordinance prohibits discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations. The protected classes covered by the measure

are race, religion, color, sex, national origin, marital status, mental or physical disability, familial status, sexual orientation, source of income, and gender identity.

Benton County resident Derrick Travers, a female-to-male trans activist, has worked closely with After 8 in promoting passage of the ordinance.

The 25-year-old came out about four years ago as a trans person, and, he says, faces "low-level, ongoing verbal harassment."

"It's very gratifying to see this pass, particularly given how explicit it is regarding transsex-

sexual minority issues ... discrimination based on sexual orientation is not the same thing as discrimination based on gender identity." The ordinance, he says, acknowledges and responds to that reality, and offers trans folks a particular clarity with respect to their legal protections.

Neustadt says her group approached the Benton County Board of Commissioners several months ago about approving a county ordinance.

"It's a three-member board, and we felt we had the support of two of the three commissioners," she says.

Those commissioners are Bob Speaker and Patsy Miller. "We asked [Speaker] to take it forward, and he did. It was a pretty painless process."

In fact, Neustadt says a July 1 public hearing on the proposal was "a love fest."

She estimates about four dozen supporters—and no detractors—turned out for the hearing. Backers included state Sen. Cliff Trow, a Democrat representing District 18, and state Rep. Barbara Ross, a Democrat representing District 35, both of whom provided testimony.

Speaker says he was delighted to sponsor the ordinance.

"I would say that hearing was the most gratifying moment I've had [as a commissioner]," he says. "To hear all those people speak out in support was really quite something. You feel like you're really making a difference in people's lives. It made me really proud to live here."



After 8 member Derrick Travers, Benton County commissioners Patsy Miller and Bob Speaker and After 8 president Karuna Neustadt.

ual and transgendered people," says Travers. "In society, there remains a lot of confusion around

HRC EQUALITY TOUR KICKS OFF

National organization launches regional voter education tour in Portland by Inga Sorensen

Kathleen Saadat's voice boomed across the square.

"Bigotry is bigotry is bigotry," said the longtime activist, who stood poised before the microphone. It was the noonish hour on July 31. Saadat, along with several dozen others, had converged upon Pioneer Courthouse Square, Portland's so-called "living room," for the inception of the Human Rights Campaign's 1998 Equality Tour, a 17-day queer rights caravan which is wending its way along a 2,300-mile path through Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

HRC, based in Washington, D.C., is a national gay and lesbian political organization that lobbies Congress and provides support to selected political campaigns.

The 1998 Equality Tour will eventually circle back to Portland, where it is scheduled to wrap up August 16.

During the kick-off, locales such as Saadat, the Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten, and nightclub owner Darcelle XV (decked out in a black and red gown and a generous dab of rouge), joined with national figures like Betty DeGeneres (Ellen's mom), and Candace Gingrich, (Newt's sis) to churn up enthusiasm for the HRC effort, which is designed in part to register voters and educate the public about gay, lesbian and bisexual political issues.

David Wu, Democratic candidate in Oregon's 1st Congressional District, is running against Molly Bordonaro, a highly conservative—and charismatic—Republican in the November election. Wu addressed ralliers.

"We are in a struggle not only here in Oregon but across American between the extreme and

the mainstream," Wu told onlookers, who included afternoon lunchers strewn upon the amphitheater steps and book browsers sniffing out goodies at Powell's three-day Square Deal Sale.

Wu blasted current congressional leaders like the GOP's Trent Lott—who recently likened queerness to kleptomania—for "taking us to the hinterlands of extremism."

To get back on track, he said, equality-minded candidates must get elected. Wu then held up a 1998 Christian Coalition voter guide: "You'll see my opponent has a perfect record."

In a staid beige blazer, DeGeneres noted it is "sad there is a need for an Equality Tour at all."

Saadat, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of coalition-building among oppressed groups, hence the cry: "Bigotry is bigotry is bigotry."

Gingrich, dubbed the "good Gingrich" by rally emcee and HRC national field director Donna Red Wing, pointed to HRC's logo—a yellow equal sign on a blue backdrop—and said, "This is the Equality Tour, not the Specialty Tour," referring, of course, to claims by anti-gay forces that equal marriage rights for same-sex couples (among other things) are somehow "special rights."

Darcelle XV called upon queers to give money to The Cause and press candidates on their policy positions.

"I'd say, 'What do you think of me? I wear a dress.' If they can't look me in the eye and say, 'Darcelle, let's go party,' then I'm not voting for them," she chirped.

■ On Aug. 16 from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., an end-of-tour rally will take place at Laurelhurst Park, S.E. 39th Ave. and Stark Street in Portland. Earlier that day, Red Wing will give 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. sermons at the Metropolitan Community Church of Portland, 2400 N.E. Broadway. At 1 p.m., there will be a community meeting at MCC.

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