

# EVERGREEN EQUALITY

**Same-sex domestic partner benefits will soon be available to employees of Washington state**

**B**eginning in January, gay and lesbian employees of Washington state will be allowed to add their partners to their health insurance plans, reports The Associated Press.

The May 23 decision by the Public Employees Benefits Board followed public testimony that touched on questions of morality, cost and whether the board was pulling an end-run around the Legislature.

The 6-1 decision makes Washington the fifth state to authorize same-sex partner benefits for its government workers.

During open enrollment this fall, gay and lesbian state employees, including those in higher education, will be allowed to submit an "affidavit of domestic partnership" to sign up their partners for benefits. Requirements may include

both partners being over 18, each being the other's sole partner, and sharing a residence and family finances for at least six months.

If about 1,000 employees sign up their partners, it will cost the retirement system roughly \$3 million per year. Unless the Legislature agrees to cover that cost, it will be borne by active and retired state employees, at an estimated \$2.43 a month.

The issue will likely reverberate through the coming race for governor, since Democratic Gov. Gary Locke requested the change and his Republican foes are opposed.

The Christian Coalition and other opponents said they will head to court to try to prevent implementation of the new policy.

At a news conference before the board's hearing, Rick Forcier, head of the state chapter

of the Christian Coalition, and other critics called the action a backdoor effort to legitimize same-sex unions and unravel the state's Defense of Marriage Act.

Forcier called homosexuality "the deadliest lifestyle on the planet" and said the state has no business doing anything that might help perpetuate or validate it.

Testimony at the board meeting was balanced, however.

Greg Devereux, head of the Washington Federation of State Employees, which first proposed the change, said it is about one thing—workplace discrimination. The cost is fairly minimal and many businesses and local governments already have made the change, he said.

Sally Fox, benefits manager for Seattle, said the city has offered domestic partner benefits for 11 years and finds it pays less in claims for partners than for spouses.

Microsoft, Boeing, Starbucks and other successful companies have demonstrated that same-sex benefits are important to employee morale and to a company's ability to compete for the best workers, said state Rep. Ed Murray, D-Seattle.

# RED-TAPED REGISTRY

*Continued from the cover*

**A**n advisory committee has been meeting with city and county officials with the intent of bringing the idea to a vote. Representatives of Multnomah County and the city of Portland, as well as several private-practice attorneys, sit on the committee.

Many gay-positive organizations have also been participating in the process: Love Makes a Family; Oregon Gay and Lesbian Law Association; Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; Rural Organizing Project; Basic Rights Oregon; and others all provided input.

If the registry ordinance is approved, domestic partners will be required to be over 18 and will need to provide proof of age when registering. A couple will also sign a notarized statement declaring their domestic partnership.

Recognition of the partnership can remain private (with a certificate issued to the couple) or can be made part of the public record with either the city of Portland or Multnomah County.

Eighmey says it has not been announced which government agency will administer the registry.

A domestic partnership registry law, with similar wording, is on the books in Ashland,



City Hall, in downtown Portland, might host some same-sex unions in the near future

Ore. Eighmey says nine couples have utilized that registry.

Registries exist in small and large cities across the country—places such as Chicago, Detroit, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Seattle and San Francisco, as well as Iowa City, Iowa, and Chapel Hill, N.C.

A final vote by the Multnomah County Commission and Portland's City Council is expected no later than July. The draft ordi-

nance, meanwhile will be available to the public online at [www.ci.portland.or.us/mayor/](http://www.ci.portland.or.us/mayor/).

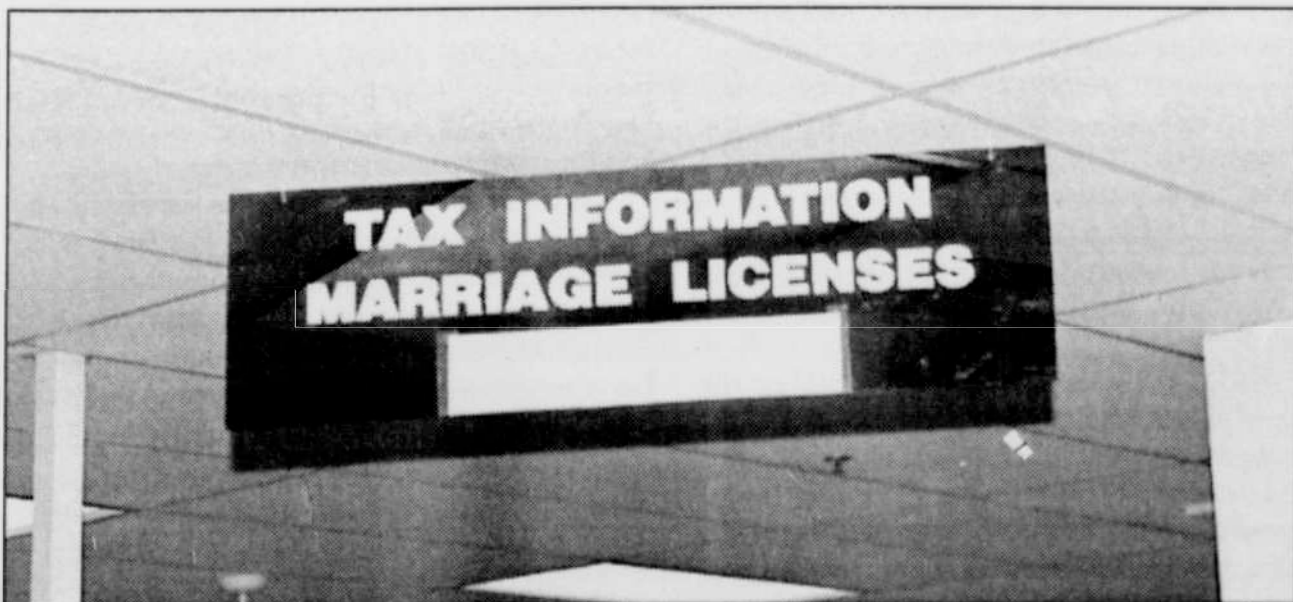
Although some believe a domestic partnership registry is not likely to have any legal impact for sexual minorities, a registry may have some social significance, giving couples a public forum to announce their relationship.

Last January, Mayor Katz told *Just Out* that the registry could be a useful tool to assist gay men, lesbians and their families in documenting their committed relationships—possibly making it easier to obtain health benefits, visitation rights and other basic rights enjoyed by other families.

A mass registering party had been planned for June 17 as part of Portland's weekend pride celebration. A packet describing what the registry does and does not do was to be distributed at the event.

Although Eighmey is disappointed about the delay and missing the opportunity to reach so many people during the pride event, he remains certain the final vote will take place as planned and that the registry ordinance will be passed. He says there are several opportunities coming up this fall to promote couples registering.

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Multnomah County currently issues marriage licenses at the Commonwealth Building, also downtown

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