

NORTHWESTnews

DOMESTIC PARTNER BENEFITS UPHELD

Vancouver can keep providing health insurance to gay and lesbian employees' domestic partners, the Washington Supreme Court ruled last month. The city has provided vital family benefits for the dependents of its unmarried, gay and nongay, workers since 1998, but the program was threatened by a lawsuit brought with the help of a right-wing organization.

The Virginia-based Northstar Legal Center sued in 1999 on behalf of one local resident, Roni Heinsma, contending Vancouver cannot extend any protection to unmarried employees in committed relationships because doing so purportedly would conflict with Washington state marriage law. In June 2000, a trial court rejected the arguments and ruled definitively in the city's favor, pointing out that Vancouver has not tried to regulate family relationships in general, as the marriage laws do, but instead simply is ensuring reasonable compensation for its own employees. Heinsma then appealed.

But the justices in an 8-1 decision released Aug. 23 rejected the argument that the local law creates confusion between the limited, taxable partner benefits offered to unmarried city workers and the comprehensive legal recognition provided by Washington's marriage laws. "We conclude that the city's recognition of domestic partnership is limited and that the program does not unconstitutionally interfere with the Legis-



PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

Vancouver City Councilor Jim Moeller praised the Washington Supreme Court ruling

lature's ability to regulate familial relationships on a statewide level," Justice Susan Owens wrote for the majority.

Openly gay City Councilor Jim Moeller, who first proposed the policy change in 1997, was concerned about the lawsuit because conservatives successfully have reversed similar benefits in other states. He said that the ruling didn't come as shock but that the 8-1 majority did.

"I was elated," Moeller said. "I was surprised at the overwhelming majority. I was thinking we might have less than that, but I was feeling pretty confident that we would win."

Attorney Jennifer C. Pizer, who helped write a joint amicus brief filed by Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington and the National ACLU Lesbian and Gay Rights Project, praised the ruling. "The court has reinforced security and fairness for more families in Vancouver and throughout Washington," she said.

Lambda has assisted cities and counties around the country in defending domestic partner benefits for unmarried employees, defeating attacks in Atlanta; Chicago; New York; Santa Barbara, Calif.; Pima County, Ariz; and Broward County, Fla.

"At a time when the latest census figures show that same-sex couples are living in virtually every community across the country, we are gratified that yet another state high court has rejected a fringe attempt to block insurance and other protections for these families," legal director Ruth E. Harlow said.

THE TROUBLE WITH DERRY

Embattled Portland Public Schools board member Derry Jackson finally met with Mayor Vera Katz on Aug. 21, exactly a month

after his anti-Semitic comments first appeared in the *Oregonian*. She has been requesting the face-to-face confrontation ever since.

"We had an open and candid discussion about issues relating to the school board," Katz said in a statement. "I explained to him why I thought some of his recent words had been painful to many. Mr. Jackson stated that he intends to continue meeting with members of the community. I encourage him to do so."

Meanwhile, Jackson has yet another outspoken critic to contend with. Portland writer Jeff Muir has launched the Internet site www.dumpderry.org.

He says that he is not opposed to the recall effort proposed by Portlanders Against Prejudice but that he doesn't want to wait until January 2002 to start collecting signatures, as required by law. Instead, Muir hopes to convince Jackson to resign through an "effective, guerrilla, political campaign...whatever we can pull together," he told the *Portland Tribune*.

TRANSPORTATION TRIAGE

Some Cascade AIDS Project clients recently were surprised to learn that, despite their low income, they no longer could receive transportation assistance from the organization.

Even among qualified applicants, for example, transportation manager Helene Rimberg says the program places a priority on serving individuals who live in outlying counties and who are living below the federal poverty level. Because of limited resources,

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David W. Owens Brady M. Ricks Roger Gray* Richard A. Crews†
*of counsel †licensed Oregon, Washington, and Colorado

101 SW MAIN, SUITE 700 • Portland, Oregon 97204 503-224-3100

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