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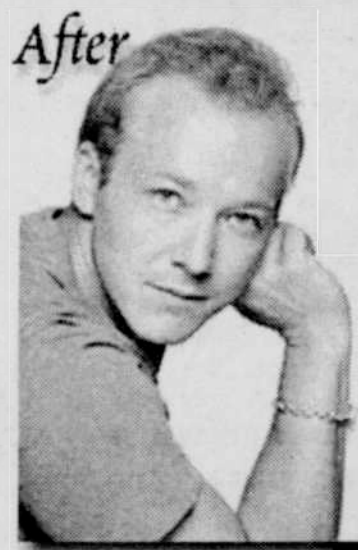
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## NORTHWEST news

# A MEASURE OF RIGHTS

**Vancouver/Clark County Human Rights Commission faces November referendum** by Timothy Krause

"If we don't begin to develop respectful relationships with minority communities living in Vancouver and Clark County, the only thing we have to look forward to is more conflict," Jim Moeller says.

Yet, conflict is what this openly gay second-term City Council member is facing in his effort to create an agency addressing issues of harassment and discrimination.

After a year of study and several public hearings, Moeller's community coordinating committee this summer recommended the establishment of the Vancouver/Clark County Human Rights Commission. The City Council gave its nod in a 5-1 vote July 16, and county commissioners passed the measure unanimously July 24.

Almost immediately, critics of the ordinance petitioned the City Council to reconsider. By collecting the minimum 2,948 signatures from registered Vancouver voters, the opposition forced the council either to rescind its vote or place the decision on the Nov. 6 ballot as a referendum. The council voted 6-1 during its Sept. 4 meeting to send the matter to the public.

Moeller remains firm about the need for the commission. The committee proposing the ordinance documented more than 450 local incidents of discrimination or harassment in 2000, with more likely unreported.

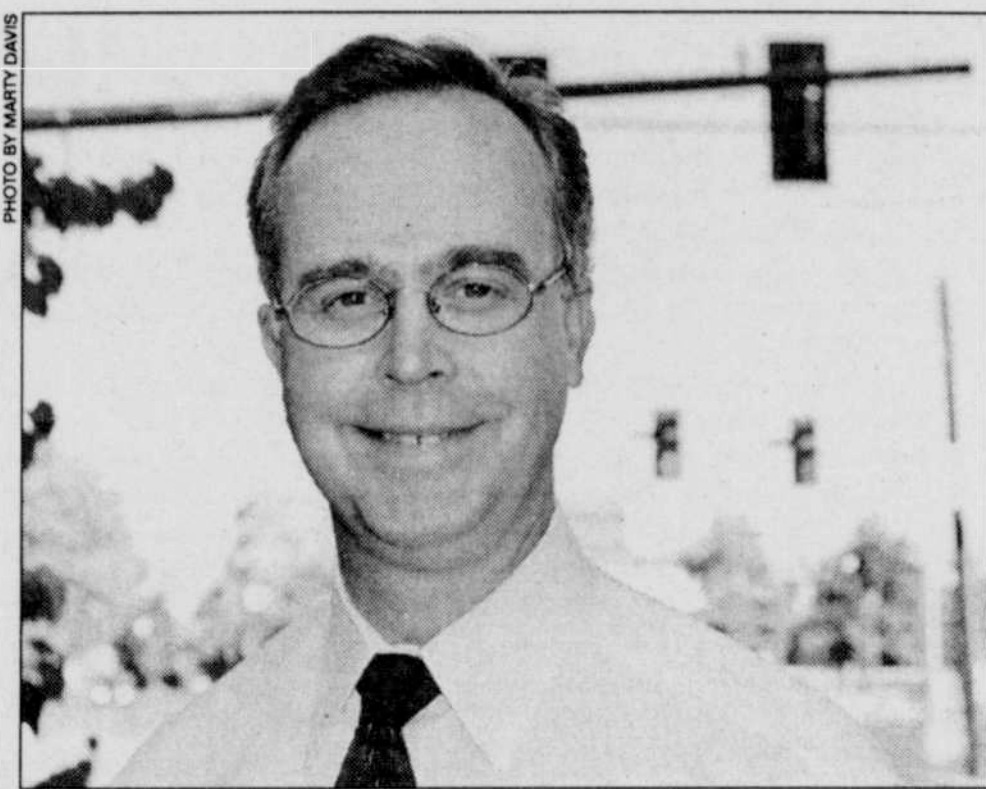
Race is a substantial issue, but supporters also indicate a need to challenge discrimination and harassment based on other factors, such as gender, age and disability. "We're now seeing not just an issue of race but an issue of culture," says Moeller, a 46-year-old chemical dependency counselor for Kaiser Permanente.

The basic goal of the commission would be to eliminate and prevent discrimination in work, housing, public accommodation, credit and insurance.

The proposal provides for a full-time staff person and nine commissioners appointed through a public process. The city and county each would provide \$50,000 in annual funding, and the commission would be subject to an annual public review.

The primary objection to the agency is that it is seen as a duplication of services provided by the Washington State Human Rights Commission. But the local entity's mission centers on education, information, mediation and referral—services its state counterpart does not provide, according to Moeller.

For example, upon request, the commission could provide diversity education and training programs targeted to the community. It could become a clearinghouse of reliable data specifically about Vancouver and Clark County. Mediation would be a focal point, addressing issues before pursuing formal litigation, potentially saving taxpayers from costly lawsuits. The office could refer cases not only to the state but also to appropriate federal agencies, such as the Equal



City Councillor Jim Moeller says conservative critics' concerns are groundless

Employment Opportunity Commission or the Housing and Urban Development Department.

"We believe this is a very moderate approach," comments Moeller, noting that investigation and enforcement measures still would be handled by the state office.

He says the commission has the support of the police guild, the chamber of commerce, social services agencies and others. Still, he doesn't underestimate his conservative opponents who perceive an "agenda."

In a letter to the editor of the *Springhill Review*, for example, referendum supporter Jeanne Schaefer asserts that the ordinance was formed to provide legal protections for gay men and lesbians. "This ordinance is not about equal rights but is another incremental step toward special rights for a specific group using other minorities as a thinly veiled shield," she writes.

Moeller responds: "The implication is that there is also some 'gay agenda.' Sexual orientation currently is not protected in Washington state from discrimination in housing, employment or public accommodation, and since the local HRC will be based on state and federal laws, their concerns in this area are groundless and appear overtly bigoted."

Reports from council meetings suggest some Vancouver residents also fear that their right to free speech will be restricted and that education materials will be simply propaganda.

In response to the referendum, a "Yes on Human Rights" campaign has been established. Supported by public donations, volunteers will disseminate information about how the commission would function and the scope of its activity.

"Regardless of the outcome in November, the community has begun the discussion of harassment and discrimination," Moeller says. "It needs to happen, and it will continue to happen. If it doesn't go forward with this commission, it will go forward in another way." □

The YES ON HUMAN RIGHTS campaign can be contacted at [4human-rights@home.com](mailto:4human-rights@home.com) or 11500 N.E. 76th St., A-3/15, Vancouver, WA 98662. The WASHINGTON STATE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION can be reached at 360-753-6770 or 800-233-3247. To reach referendum leaders, call Joannie Schrader at 360-896-6075 or Karen Schaffer at 360-885-7700.

TIMOTHY KRAUSE is a writer and editor in Portland.