

The Student Protection Act II—an anti-gay measure filed by the Oregon Citizens Alliance in December 2000—will not appear on the Nov. 5 ballot, according to chairman Lon Mabon, who called it a “doomed effort.”

“We did not, in our estimation, gather enough signatures or even close to gathering enough signatures to qualify the initiative for the ballot, so we’re not going to even turn in what we had,” he told *Just Out*, referring to the July 5 deadline. When asked for details on just how short the OCA was, he replied, “Considerably—just leave it at that.”

The act would have prohibited public school instruction that approves, promotes or endorses homosexual or bisexual behaviors. Unlike 2000’s similar Measure 9, it included exceptions involving AIDS education, suicide prevention and teacher termination.

Mabon was found in contempt of court and sent to jail Feb. 20 for refusing to participate in lesbian photographer Catherine Stauffer’s ongoing lawsuit to collect more than \$40,000 owed to her for a 1991 assault. Upon his release in April he admitted the case had “thrown a major monkey wrench” into the signature-gathering process.

“It did take my wife and I, obviously, numerous hours and quite a bit of our focus away from recruiting volunteers and trying to get things going—not only the time in jail but also leading up to it and afterwards,” he said. “But that in and of itself was not the main problem.”

Mabon blamed most of the shortage on volunteer fatigue as well as new restrictions on signature gathering. He denied that his failure to qualify for the ballot indicates fewer Oregonians agree with his positions.

“It’s not because there isn’t an interest out there and a concern out there for the subject matter of the initiative,” he said. “We had just gone through a major campaign...and our people were understandably tired and a little bit disillusioned in the fact that the state and much of its media could lie about the initiative we had then, and to just turn right around and put forth the same effort again to get it back on the ballot—they were tired and worn out, and they did not respond as they normally and usually do.”

Mabon cited an Oregon Supreme Court decision restricting locations where organizations can collect petition signatures, such as strip malls and shopping centers. Still, he said volunteers found a few places around the state where they regularly could lure 20 to 25 supporters an hour.

“The reports we have is that people were signing, in the few locations that we were at, more enthusiastically than ever before,” he said.

A LON TIME COMING

Oregon Citizens Alliance fails to collect enough signatures for fall ballot by Jim Radosta



Lon Mabon said his Feb. 20 arrest took the OCA’s focus away from the signature-gathering process

“People don’t realize how hard it is for a volunteer organization to collect 100,000 signatures—or give or take whatever is needed, whether it’s a constitutional [amendment] or statutory. But even to collect 85 or 90,000 to qualify a statutory is a major effort for a non-paying, grassroots-type organization.

“So when you couple those two things together, it was pretty much a doomed effort this time around. But we’ll be back.”

Mabon vowed to refile the measure for 2004 “fairly immediately” because the legal process to allow signature gathering can take six to eight months. He hinted at more wording changes but said they would be “very minor.”

So, how does Mabon plan to overcome all of these obstacles the next time around? He hopes to get an earlier start, find more volunteers, involve other organizations and gain access to more congregations.

“If every church in the state just gave one

Sunday to collect signatures, we could collect the signatures in one weekend,” he said. “But getting them to do it is another matter. Maybe they will realize that without their help, we’re not going to protect the kids in the school from this lifestyle being presented to them as good, safe and normal.”

Officials at Basic Rights Oregon were prepared to mount a campaign to fight the Student Protection Act II if it qualified for the fall ballot: They already had received grant money from the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and were in the process of hiring a staff of activists. Nonetheless, executive director Roey Thorpe was relieved to learn her organization will have one less challenge to overcome.

“We are pleased that Oregonians will not have to fight another assault on their rights this year,” she said. “Mabon blames his difficulties in

court for his failure. But I do believe that it all comes down to the fact that he promotes extreme discrimination, and Oregonians don’t.”

Thorpe said BRO now will be able to concentrate on proactively protecting queer rights, supporting fair-minded candidates, opposing hate crimes and increasing acceptance through its educational programs. In the coming months the organization also will decide on its agenda for the next session of the Oregon Legislature.

“We hope to pass legislation that makes discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity illegal in our state,” Thorpe said. “That would be our ultimate goal.”

Meanwhile, Mabon is kicking off his candidacy as the Oregon Constitution Party nominee for U.S. Senate, a race he entered because Republican Gordon Smith supports some pro-gay legislation. He refused to consider himself a possible “spoiler” in the contest even though he might pull conservative votes from the incumbent, giving the edge to Democrat Bill Bradbury.

Smith “has every right and every ability to gain and garner support from any area,” Mabon said. “If he doesn’t gain and garner my support, or people’s support like me, then to classify us, by exercising our constitutional rights to get somebody elected who supports our positions, as ‘spoiling’ his effort, I don’t think that’s fair.”

Just Out also asked Mabon about the Committee for Constitutional Courts, which was established to raise money for his legal defense against Stauffer. Director Jeremy Bowen solicited funds from donors by promising they could take a credit on their state taxes—a statute intended only for political action committees that advocate on behalf of a candidate, measure or political party.

BRO board member Ellen Lowe filed a formal complaint June 21 with the Oregon Elections Division requesting the committee be fined for characterizing itself as a PAC. “Oregon citizens should not be subsidizing Lon Mabon’s personal legal defense,” attorney Margaret S. Olney wrote in a letter to campaign finance manager Fred Neal.

“Obviously, I was not involved in the decision for Jeremy to start a PAC or to use the proceeds for my legal defense, since I was detained,” Mabon said. “I don’t think he’s done anything improper or anything that a PAC can’t do, but we’ll see.”

BASIC RIGHTS OREGON will toast the coming “ballot measure free” months during a special celebration from 6 to 8:30 p.m. July 8 at 3 Friends Coffeehouse, 201 S.E. 12th Ave. For more information call 503-222-6151.

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