

OLYMPIA GAMES

Gay politician runs for Washington House seat
by Jack Turteltaub

Vancouver City Councilor Jim Moeller doesn't really care what people think anymore—about his sexual orientation.

In spite of being vilified last year by right-wing homophobes for his role in passing a city Human Rights Commission ordinance that went on to be repealed by a 2-1 margin in November, the Democrat recently decided to run for Seat 2, District 49 in the state Legislature. Shrugging off past criticism, Moeller laughs philosophically, "Unless a candidate or official commits a crime, there's no such thing as bad publicity."

The seat he is seeking has been held for more than 20 years by Democrats and for the past 12 by Val Ogden. When the tall, bespectacled city councilor heard the 79-year-old woman was not seeking re-election, he hardly gave it a thought.

But when Ogden endorsed a complete unknown to replace her, people started talking to Moeller. He weighed what it would mean to his political goals and his personal life to join the state Legislature.

There was just one problem. Unlike Oregon, Washington's Legislature meets each year, a 106-day session in budget years and a 60-day session in off-budget years. Moeller knew that would mean a lot of time away from home, even if Olympia is only a two-hour drive north on Interstate 5.

Putting his priorities in order, he consulted the most important person in his life: his partner, Clark Crawford. He was supportive but warned, "Don't expect me to ring any doorbells."

Moeller put his political skills to work, promising Crawford that during sessions he would spend weekends at home. He describes his partner as "the private yin to my public yang."

Now more than halfway through his second term as Vancouver's only openly gay politician, Moeller is running for the Legislature because he wants to do more for Clark County, his life-long home and the place he has helped improve significantly.

Looking out the windows of a busy downtown cafe, he notes with obvious pride how much Vancouver has changed in a short time. Roads are torn up, and several cranes rise above the growing skyline. "When I came on the council, downtown was dead, dead, dead."

Supporting measures to reinvigorate the dying city center, Moeller has been instrumental in the changes that can be seen today. He points out the various construction projects—multi-use properties that will bring condos, businesses and retail outlets to the core of Portland's close-but-so-distant neighbor to the north. He mentions nearby Esther Short Park, an area that used to be frequented by the homeless and drug dealers but now borders buildings sprouting on its western side.

Moeller sees economics and health care as the two major issues in this election, citing the current recession and high unemployment along with exploding medical costs. He throws out a fascinating statistic: 60,000 working Vancouverites cross the bridge into Portland each day to earn their bread and butter.

That means citizens of Clark County get a double whammy: paying Oregon state income tax plus Washington state sales tax. Moeller



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

If elected, Jim Moeller would join three other openly gay Washington state legislators

doesn't want families reduced to making a choice between "heating or eating."

He notes another fascinating statistic: 50 percent of the kids in Vancouver's public schools are eligible for free lunches. He also talks about changing the infrastructure, improving transportation to attract the types of industry that will bring family wages to an area that has offered largely blue-collar and rural jobs in the past.

"We need a good regional airport here before all the good land is gone," he says. This means going after money from the Legislature and changing the way the Port of Vancouver thinks about its operations.

Moeller is keenly aware of many working couples who earn too much to qualify for Medicare, Medicaid or Washington State Basic Health but don't have the types of jobs that provide good benefits, including decent health coverage. He wants to work on expanding medical coverage under Washington Basic Health so more people can take advantage of the plan and get the care they need.

Recognizing that even if he wins the primary Sept. 17 he will have a strong, well-funded Republican opponent who will try to use his sexual orientation against him in the general election Nov. 5, Moeller seems calm and unperturbed. He's been there before, of course—last year.

During the repeal campaign Moeller always focused on the positive. "A number of people saw me as a leader, someone not willing to get vicious and ugly" in response to personal attacks, including the charge that he was implementing a "homosexual agenda."

Whatever the outcome of his election effort, one gets the feeling Moeller will continue to be a strong voice for the average citizen in his beloved city and district as well as an enviable role model for the sexual minorities community. **JT**

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