

High-tech Internet surveys, emotional community forums and official endorsements by key organizations illustrate how a new attempt to establish a queer community center in Portland is both grassroots and professional, serious in its intent to be inclusive, and comprehensive in its assessment of feasibility.

Earlier this year, an informal group of leaders from among Portland's sexual minorities and advocates was called together by Sam Adams, Mayor Vera Katz's chief of staff. The gay man wanted to help launch a diverse exploratory committee to expand on work initiated by the Queer Committee, an offshoot of Outside In. The consensus was to gather input to determine whether and how to proceed with a queer community center.

"For me it's an open question," Adams says. "Half my brain thinks it's time for Portland to have one, but at the same time I've been involved in public policy enough to know that you have to do a certain amount of outreach and study to make sure that it really is going to help. It's all in how you do it."

So far, the "how" has been methodical, comprehensive and consensus-driven. A series of five meetings has led to the establishment of the Community Center Fund, a temporary but formal nonprofit organization charged with directing the research necessary for future development of the facility.

Actively involved have been representatives from organizations such as Basic Rights Oregon, Brother to Brother, the Burnside Triangle Advisory Group, Cascade AIDS Project, It's Time Oregon!, the Lesbian Community Project, the Northwest Gender Alliance, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus and Vanguard Youth Services.

After preparing a budget that takes advantage of numerous in-kind donations—as well as a \$5,000 kick start from the city's Bureau of Housing and Community Development—Adams' "fire starter" leadership role soon will diminish as an interim board begins directing a series of public Speak Out Forums, a comprehensive survey and a professional feasibility study.



Mike Piña (inset) suggests this vacant space at 1025 S.W. Washington St. in the Burnside Triangle would be suitable to develop into a queer community center

## BREAKING COMMON GROUND

**A new grassroots effort explores the feasibility of a queer community center in Portland**

by Timothy Krause

**Multiple forums.** Nearly 50 people attended the first forum held May 29 at Central Library. Many offered personal stories that testified to the need or benefit of having a queer community center, especially as a refuge and resource for those growing up or coming out. Individuals offered ideas about what the center might be like, addressing location, services, amenities and organizational structure. The forums continue throughout the summer.

**30,000 surveys.** A confidential survey titled "Out With It! 2003: What Have You Got to Say?" will be distributed at the forums, in *Just Out*, on the Web, at Portland Pride 2003 and at other locations. Building on the polling experience of the Burnside Triangle Advisory Group and others, questions range from general demographics to what people would like to see in a center to how Portland queers feel about the community in which they live.

"The survey will help more than just the community center project," Adams says. "It will help those of us in government to have a better understanding of the state of the local community. It will help the nonprofit organizations that have as part of their mission the support and advocacy of the LGBTQ community. And it will help the for-profit businesses that want to help the LGBTQ community."

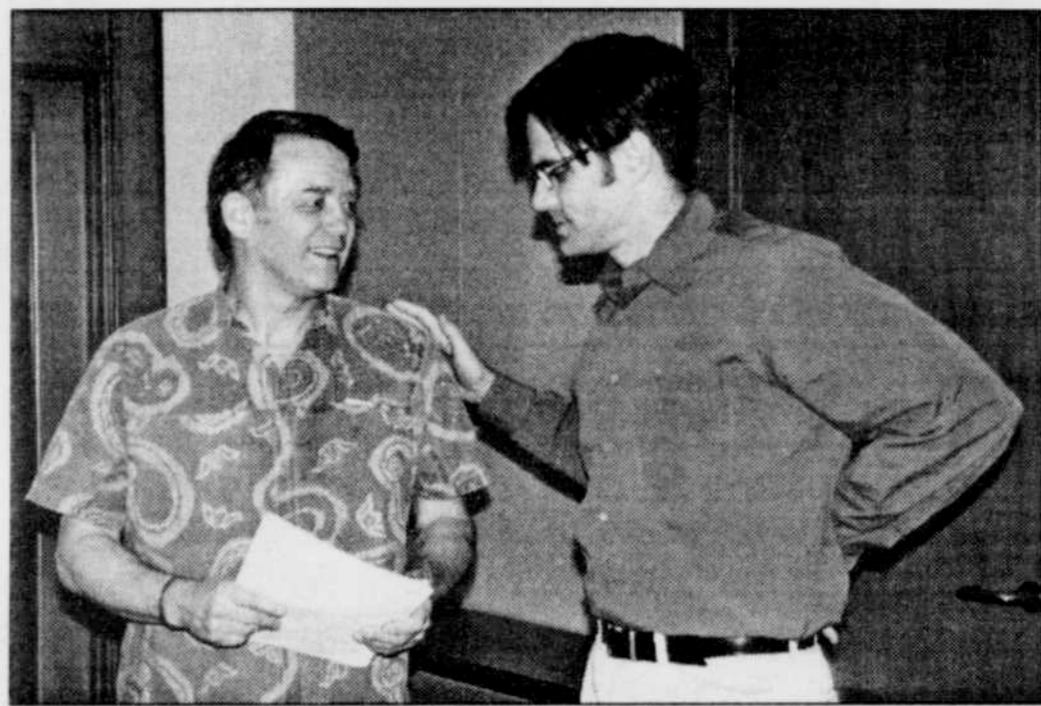
**Feasibility study.** Quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data from the forums then will be used to prepare a formal feasibility study. The report will focus on what kind of organization and facility would work best to address needs and wants of community members. The evaluation will include what is practical in terms of not only a capital campaign but also ongoing financial stability. Results will be released by Oct. 1, after which the Community Center Fund will determine whether to establish a new nonprofit organization that would actually develop and run the facility.

At several meetings Adams acknowledged that some participants will think the process moves too fast, while others will find the process moving too slowly.

Brother to Brother representative Andre Pruitt, for example, expressed concern that queers of color might be left out of the process if it moves too swiftly and does not actively seek their input in an accessible manner.

Mike Piña, Burnside Triangle Advisory Group member and business owner, says the contingent should push ahead to seize immediate opportunities. The group's research already has demonstrated the need, he contends, and a group of anonymous but high-profile donors are interested in providing funds to lease a building available in the historically gay Burnside Triangle.

"The establishment of a gay community center is an important milestone in the maturity of our community, and the quicker we establish



The Queer Committee's John Coomler (left) consults with Sam Adams during the Speak Out Forum held May 29 at Central Library

that, the quicker we can mature the services offered," Piña wrote in an e-mail to *Just Out*.

He also suggests that acquiring the downtown location now would do more than cushion the center's startup and effectively launch its fund-raising campaign. Piña says siting a queer community center in the Burnside Triangle would help ensure that the area's inevitable gentrification is gay-friendly. Furthermore, the building is in a usable state, central to transportation connections and offered at a below-market rate.

But interim board member and co-chairwoman Gwenn Baldwin, who ran the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Community Center before returning to Portland last summer, offers caution.

"I've seen firsthand what a wonderful and powerful asset a center can be for a community. I always thought that Portland needed a way for queer people to come together." But, she says, "It is sometimes tempting to jump ahead and declare there will be a center without having determined the right center for the community—or even if one is needed at all. Every city is different, and we need to know what is needed and what is possible before we start designing buildings. We can't assume anything, and we need to build ownership broadly for any outcome."

Piña's group of potential donors, who also expressed concern about a political conflict of interest should Adams have remained involved with the project, is expected to create a separate endowment fund earmarked for a queer community center. Should a formal organization be established, funding then could be sought from the endowment specifically for "bricks and mortar" projects. This would allow both a thorough process of discovery and the immediate momentum of fund raising to proceed in parallel efforts toward a common goal.

Although various parties have attempted to ignite a sustainable interest for a Portland center in the past, motivation waned when leaders burned out, had too few resources or lacked enough broad-based support from a diverse representation of the community.

Members of the Community Center Fund's temporary board of directors, however, are optimistic.

CM Hall, for instance, envisions a place that is supportive for youth and elders. "Something that can bring together diverse factions, bridge different minorities within the LGBTQ community and offer a safe meeting place for these groups," she remarks.

great place for people to find job postings, queer-friendly housing, support groups and counseling."

Although vice chairman Kaelin Bowers wishes the process would move faster, he understands the importance of ensuring that every community is included in decision-making. The key, he says, is to put aside differences. "Situations and discussions might become volatile and stressful, but I hope that the outcome of these situations ends up promoting the most important goal of creating the community center."

Jacob Brostoff adds: "It's high time Portland had a place where all Portlanders can celebrate their diversity, identities and the city they love. A LGBTQ community center is a reflection of our communities' pride, visibility and success!"

If realized, a queer community center in Portland would join more than 139 centers or similar sites that operate in 36 states and serve

more than 1 million clients annually, according to the National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Centers. Once established, however, operations can be challenging. For example, a San Francisco center that opened only last year reported in May an operating deficit of \$642,000 and bank debt of more than \$2 million, according to *Bay Area Reporter*. And Oregon's only such facility, the Abdill-Ellis

Center in Ashland, nearly closed two years ago because of community apathy and leadership conflicts.

"Many times we are in a reactionary mode, whether it's a crisis or emergency," notes David Martinez, co-chairman of the Portland effort. "In this case, we are bringing the community together to get a sense of where we are, where we want to go and how a community center can support our endeavors. Whatever the outcome, the discussions, connections and collaboration among the diverse groups in our community throughout this process will benefit everyone."

Baldwin concurs, saying, "If we continue this study inclusively and deliberately, I think we will create something truly important for Oregon's queer community." □

The next SPEAK OUT FORUM will be held at 6:30 p.m. June 29. For location call 503-535-3815, e-mail [portlandqueercenter@yahoo.com](mailto:portlandqueercenter@yahoo.com) or write to P.O. Box 1682, Portland, OR 97207. To complete the online version of the queer community center survey, visit [www.outwithit2003.com](http://www.outwithit2003.com).

For Markie Acevedo, a center represents a more personal connection. "I came out late in my life, at 45 years old, and the San Diego Community Center helped me to plug into the community," she says. "I also identify as bisexual, and bisexuals are a minority within sexual minorities. But I was able to find community through a bi group at the community center. Plus, it is a

PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

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