

Progressives came together Feb. 19 for a forum organized by a group that's hoping to show young voters that political discussions can be engaging, sassy and sexy.

During the first hour of the Third Thursday forum, people of all ages straggled in and milled about, taking stock of the free refreshments, including yummy hummus, a keg of respectable ale and lots of Trader Joe's bargain red wine. The free booze is just one clue that this group is in touch with youth.

After a healthy period of socializing, the political discussion got under way, focusing on the theme "Getting Down and Dirty About Equal Rights in Oregon." The panel included representatives from Basic Rights Oregon, Planned Parenthood, the National Abortion Rights Action League and the Oregon Assembly for Black Affairs.

Maria Damaris Silva of Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United spoke compellingly for the mostly Latino workers in her union. When asked who has the ear of Oregon legislators, she quipped, "Money," which played well to the crowd of 60 or so progressives.

When the panelists were asked what their organizations' top three priorities were for the upcoming state legislative session, BRO lobbyist Maura Roche laid out the agenda for queer rights: "an omnibus nondiscrimination bill prohibiting discrimination in housing, public accommodation and employment, including [on the basis of] gender identity; adding gender identity to the hate crimes statute; and defeating the Defense of Marriage Act."

The Legislature may consider a Defense of Marriage Act during a special session in June. Such legislation could take the form of a regular law or an amendment to the Oregon Constitution. Lon Mabon and like-minded homophobes would of course ideally prefer a constitutional amendment, because it would protect the state-proclaimed superiority of heterosexual relationships from those

POLITICAL PARTY

Fun forum focuses on fight for fairness

by Michael Burdick

pesky activist courts and their crazy ideas about due process and equal protection.

Would-be defenders of marriage could get a measure on the November ballot by gathering more than 75,000 signatures for a regular law—or more than 100,000 for a constitutional amendment—by July 2, either of which would be quite a feat. Alternatively, they could persuade the Legislature to vote to refer the measure to the ballot, an act that the governor does not have the power to veto.

Roche continued: "The [state] Senate is an evenly divided partisan chamber. If it becomes more right-leaning, it will be easier for this to be referred to the ballot." BRO hopes the Legislature will stop any Defense of Marriage Act from ever making it to the ballot this year or in the future.

As lobbyist for BRO, Roche will have her work cut out for her in Salem, but Oregonians everywhere who support gay rights, and progressive values in general, have the power to make a lasting difference. At least that was the not-so-subtle underlying message of the evening—and the defining vision of the host organization, the Oregon Bus Project.

The Bus Project was founded by a few progressive Oregonians who were frustrated that the Legislature has been so conservative for so long, despite the fact that at one time the Beaver State was on the cutting edge. In the 1970s, forward-thinking legislators passed trailblazing land use laws and led the nation toward recycling by passing the first bottle bill. Now the Legislature guts essential social services such as the Oregon Health Plan and can't find stable funding for increasingly desperate schools.

In addition to the fact that there has been a GOP majority in both chambers for many years (until 2002, when the



Maura Roche, Basic Rights Oregon's lobbyist at the state Legislature, hopes to put the brakes on a proposed Defense of Marriage Act

Senate became tied, with Republicans still controlling the House), one Bus Project volunteer explained that right-wingers recently have united to exclude middle-of-the-road Republicans, to the point that hardly any moderates remain in the Legislature.

Conservatives have held onto their power in the Legislature despite the presence of liberal Portland. And with the conservative talk radio monopoly and the recent successful efforts by national anti-tax groups to influence Oregon politics toward the right, progressives face many obstacles. But beyond electing fair-minded state senators and representatives in local districts, it's hard to see what progressive Portlanders can do about these problems.

That's where the Bus Project gets interesting. After the panel discussion, Jefferson Smith, one of the organization's founders, gave a fun, low-key presentation about the Bus Project to those still assembled.

Knowing that some districts like those in Portland can mostly be counted on as liberal, while others such as much of Eastern Oregon are traditionally conservative, the Bus Project's plan is to try to pick up some new seats for progressives, maybe even tip the balance of power, by focusing on parts of the state where voters might go either way. Specifically, the idea was to get a bus and use it to take a bunch of liberal Portlanders where their efforts could really make the difference for a candidate—in swing legislative dis-

tricts—and to knock on doors and tell people why they should vote for progressive politicians.

Smith said statistics show engaging voters in person is far more successful than phone banking or direct mail. He added, "When you talk to voters about national candidates like the president, most will have already formed opinions about them...but when you talk about their [state] representatives, maybe they haven't even heard of the candidate." With the old bus they acquired and a force of volunteers, Bus Project volunteers believe they can make a powerful impact without spending much money.

The Bus Project is a relatively young organization, having had its first major push in the 2002 legislative session, but Smith presented convincing evidence that it made a big difference in the races it focused on that year—and had a good time doing it. He revealed that one progressive candidate won by less than 30 votes, with Bus Project volunteers having knocked on hundreds of doors in that district.

It was Smith who, toward the end of the panel discussion, posed the most pragmatic question: "What are the most important state legislative races facing Oregon?"

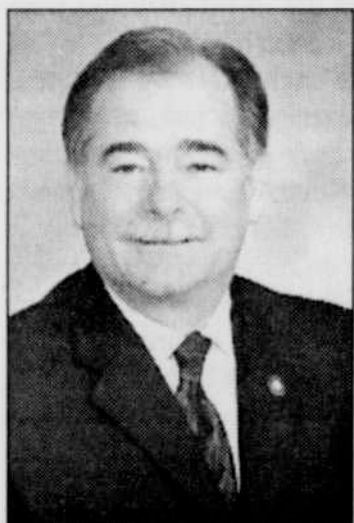
Roche replied: "In terms of the Senate, we're really looking at a key race down in the Ashland/Medford area...that is really important, a seat has been resigned by a longtime Senate Republican in a district that has a makeup that would imaginably lend itself to a Democrat being elected to office there. In addition to that, we have a race that will be hotly contested...in Gresham, in East Multnomah County, the seat retiring state Sen. John Minnis formerly occupied, again a very evenly divided seat in terms of the partisan makeup of the voters."

Smith then volunteered two state Senate races he'll be watching, one in Beaverton, where incumbent Democrat Ryan Deckert is defending his seat, and a newly redrawn district on Oregon's central coast, a seat to be vacated by conservative Ken Messerle.

No doubt the bus will be on its merry way to one of those districts soon. **JM**

For more information about the OREGON BUS PROJECT visit www.secretplan.org.

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Political insiders are keeping an eye on legislative seats being vacated by state Sens. John Minnis (left) and Ken Messerle

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—Jefferson Smith

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