

And Liberty for All

Gay candidate is favored to win seat on Metro Council

by Jodi Helmer

Robert Liberty is passionate about land use, transportation planning, recycling and affordable housing—issues on the minds of many Portlanders these days. His commitment to local issues has the 51-year-old campaigning for a seat on the Metro Council in the November election.

"My passions are Metro's issues," he says. "They are important issues in the community. They may not be sexy, but they're important."

He believes the council's goals—applying democracy to the process of how the city grows and the way its citizens live—is an exciting aspect of living in Portland.

Liberty earned his undergraduate degree from University of Oregon and a graduate degree at Oxford University before attending Harvard Law School. After college he accepted a position with 1000 Friends of Oregon, where his participation in education, research and litigation pertaining to land use laws intensified his passion for local issues and desire to be part of the political process.

Liberty ran for Metro in both 1990 and 1992. Although he did not win either election, he garnered a competitive 49.6 percent and 45 percent of the vote, respectively.

Liberty is running again because he believes he can make a difference in the city.

"We need to bring growth to areas where it would be beneficial, work harder to ensure people can find affordable places to live in neighborhoods and school districts they like, ensure our city remains green and find ways to make it greener, and find a more balanced approach to our transportation needs," he says.

It appears that voters agree with his strategy. Liberty snagged 44.7 percent of the vote in the May primary and is a favorite to win the November election. His campaign has been endorsed by *The Oregonian*, the Sierra Club and numerous elected officials including Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten and state Sen. Ryan Deckert, D-Beaverton.

Despite the fact that the issues Metro deals with are important to livability and quality of life in the community, the race for Metro Council has not received much coverage. "The media just does not give it a lot of visibility," says Liberty.

And much of the publicity he has received for his candidacy has focused on running the race as an openly gay candidate—a fact he says will not affect his chances at being elected.

"*The Oregonian* ran a story on gay candidates running for local government," he says. "I thought I would get a lot of phone calls, both calls from people being supportive and

anonymous calls from people being abusive, but I didn't get a single call.

"It just does not seem to be a factor," he continued. "Polling done before the primary shows [being gay] is a wash; I'll gain some votes and lose some votes."

Liberty believes his sexual orientation is less of an issue in his campaign because Metro does not deal with hot-button matters of civil status, such as marriage. Still, he says, "I am surprised there has been no reaction at all."

In fact, at fund-raisers to support his campaign, Liberty says both he and his partner, Khanh Tran, have been warmly received. But for Tran, being the partner of a political candidate has been difficult at times.

"We have heard that the people who often feel angriest about [personal] attacks are not the candidates but their spouses or partners," says Liberty. "And that is the way it is with us. Khanh gets very upset. [He] is a very private person, and politics takes that away."

Despite the public face of politics, Liberty says his commitment to the future of Portland overshadows his need for privacy. He wants to get more residents involved in local issues.

One of the biggest challenges for him might be overcoming the negative publicity he has received from his challenger, incumbent Rod Monroe.



PHOTO BY MARY GAINES

Robert Liberty says being out has had little impact on his candidacy for Metro Council

"[Monroe] told *The Oregonian* that I wanted to destroy all single-family homes and replace them with mixed-use development, and less than 24 hours later he told the Builders Association that I was a no-growth, radical environmentalist," Liberty says. "His one guiding principle is his re-election. He will say anything and do anything to be re-elected."

Despite some rumors that his bid for Metro Council is a stepping stone in an aspiration for higher office, Liberty insists his focus—and his heart—are with Metro.

"Metro is a dream position for me," he says. "What Metro does is really important, and it's a chance to have an impact on our city in a unique way. It's not about being an elected official. It's having this position and doing this job. This is what I care about." □

JODI HELMER is a Portland free-lance writer.

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