

WE SUPPORT THEM

Do they support us?

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Many local and national corporations are hesitant to take a stance on Senate Bill 1000. Introduced by Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski and supported by a bipartisan group of state senators, the bill would establish civil unions for same-sex couples and prohibit discrimination toward sexual minorities in matters of employment, housing and public accommodations.

The concerns of business owners are diverse, and range from maintaining political neutrality to fear of angering the conservative consumers. Others are threatened by the perceived economic hardship and high cost of extending benefits to the same-sex partners of employees. Recent media attention on the stance of Microsoft in relation to Washington state civil rights legislation has forced a closer scrutiny of businesses in our own community.

Queer consumers wield an influential \$450 billion in buying power, according to the recently published Gay Market Guide 2005. Just as that power can be utilized to buy, it can be used to boycott. But before yanking your queer dollars away, it is useful to take a closer look at the complex dynamics of corporate involvement with politics. Many local companies with extremely progressive internal policies will not take a public stance on the bill.

High-profile companies such as Coffee People, Adidas, Starbucks, McMenamins, Widmer Brothers Brewing Company, Nike, Intel, Wieden+Kennedy and New Seasons Market have all declined to take positions on SB 1000.

But they are by no means neutral about discrimination against sexual minorities.

"We think it's presumptuous for corporations to speak for individuals," said Brian Rohter, president and CEO of New Seasons Market. "We think diversity includes diversity of opinions, and that's why we don't take positions on any political campaigns or ballot measures."

As an individual, however, Rohter testified in favor of the bill before the Senate Rules Committee on May 4 and asserts that discrimination violates his business's values. New Seasons extends health coverage to queer employees' partners and children.

"You decide who your family is, and we've done that since the day we opened our doors," he said.

Portland advertising firm Wieden+Kennedy has also demonstrated support for the queer community without an outright endorsement of SB 1000.

"Anti-discrimination is just part of our personality. I personally am gay, and being part of our senior management team, I have a sensitivity to that issue, so we certainly try to provide an environment that is open and welcoming," said Denis Moore, Wieden+Kennedy chief financial officer.

Starbucks does not plan to take a position on

SB 1000 but vows a continuing commitment to equality for sexual minorities.

"We are deeply committed to supporting global diversity—including a commitment to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues of equality," said Sanja Gould, a spokeswoman for the corporation. "The company's guiding principle lists 'embracing diversity as an essential component to the way we do business.' Further, we are proud to offer health care benefits for registered domestic partners."

In the past, Starbucks has sponsored the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Media Awards and is listed annually on the Gay and Lesbian Value Index, according to Gould. Released yearly by GLV Reports & Communications, the index is regarded widely by institutional investors, money managers, nonprofit groups and human rights advocates as a barometer of the nation's corporate sector and how it is progressing on workplace and marketplace policies in relation to sexual orientation. The index is released each June to correspond with Pride celebrations.

Like many Oregon businesses, McMenamins names sexual orientation in its anti-harassment and equal-opportunity employer policies. The company takes an extra step against harassment and discrimination by extending these protections to its customers and vendors, along with employees.

"We take our anti-harassment policy seriously," said Anne Long, human resources supervisor for McMenamins. "That's why we include our customers and vendors—everyone who is in our place of business."

However, McMenamins does not have a public position concerning the bill.

The first large corporations that have taken an official stance in support of SB 1000 are Norm Thompson Outfitters and Powell's Books, both citing an ethical obligation to do the right thing.

Although many companies stop short of supporting the bill, dozens have shown support for sexual minorities by

attending Basic Rights Oregon's annual Oregonians Against Discrimination Luncheon, held in April. The guest list reads like a queer-friendly guide for consumers. Nike hosted two tables at the event, and Columbia Sportswear attended as a sponsor. U.S. Bank, Washington Mutual, Albina Community Bank, Bank of America and Wells Fargo were also in attendance. Wieden+Kennedy was joined by communications firm Metropolitan Group. New Seasons, Safeway, Nordstrom, Powell's, Tonkon Torp, the Portland Hilton and Cingular were among numerous other event sponsors.

Senate Bill 1000 is now facing competition with House Bill 3476, which would create "reciprocal beneficiary relationships" for two adults prohibited from marrying, including siblings and same-sex couples. After nearly eight hours of public hearings, SB 1000 remains in committee, awaiting a vote on the Senate floor. 

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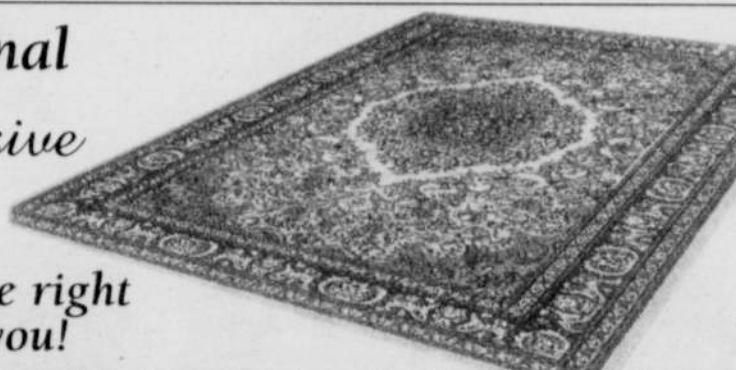
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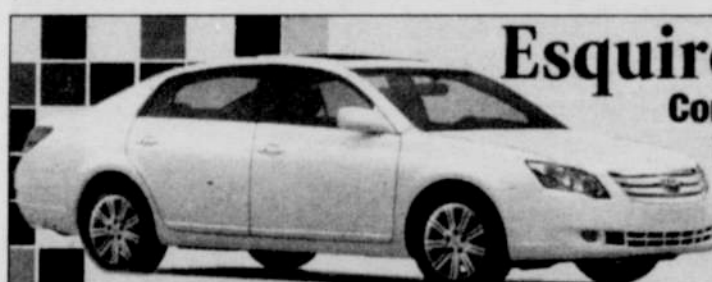
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