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Speak out

An open letter to Basic Rights Oregon

TO THE EDITOR:
 In your e-mail of July 1 to your members and supporters, you describe how Oregon legislators have received thousands of phone calls, e-mails, faxes and letters from Oregonians asking for a vote on Senate Bill 1000.
 As recently as a week ago, you assured Basic Rights Oregon supporters there was plenty of time to get a Senate vote and successfully move the bill to the House for a vote before the end of the current session. Anyone who understands how the legislative process works knows that any piece of legislation not enacted in the current session dies at the end of that session. Any effort to promote this same type of bill in a future legislative session would have to begin anew.

And now, in your July 1 correspondence, you tell us to "Accept No Excuses." You begin to gird us for defeat. What a difference a week makes.

You should not be surprised that the representatives in Salem have chosen to "sit" on this piece of legislation, ensuring that it is never passed. Even if it does receive the benefit of a vote in the Senate and moves to the House, the chances of it passing in the House are close to none. It does not have anywhere near the support in the House that it enjoys in the Senate. This should be of surprise to no one, especially yourselves. Passage in only one chamber will not suffice.

This is not to say that our community does not have supporters in these two bodies. It does mean, though, that we live in two vastly different Oregons—one that supports equal rights regardless of sexual orientation, and one that does not. We of the "same-sex" community, our legislators and BRO have failed to bridge that cultural divide.

You cannot honestly tell the Oregon same-sex community you are surprised by the lack of movement in both the Oregon Senate and House.

I believe we must consider shifting our resources and changing the front on which the battle is to be waged. If you consider that President Bush supports a "one woman, one man" marriage amendment to the U.S. Constitution, you should realize our opponents no longer view it as an issue of states' rights but one of federal, civil and constitutional rights. It would take years to achieve uniformity in marriage law for same-sex couples on a state-to-state basis, trying to win (and maintain in the courts) 50 consecutive victories. It makes more sense to redirect your energies toward a national strategy. Even if some states support marriage equality, it would likely take many, many years for those of us who seek marriage justice to realize any benefit from 50 localized skirmishes.

When you should have been positively shaping public opinion in 2004 toward the idea that gays and lesbians deserve equal rights (instead of jumping on the "marriage" bandwagon), your time and resources were first spent defending the issuance of marriage licenses and later in attempting to defeat a subsequent "one woman, one man" marriage measure that was born in direct response to your involvement in the issuance of the (ultimately invalid) marriage licenses. From those "leadership" decisions, and the summary legal judgments and legislation that have resulted, the terrain of the conflict has been irrevocably changed, and your strategies—our strategies—must change to adapt to the new environment.

At some point, you have to stand up and acknowledge your tactical errors, tell us where you succeeded and where you failed and take

credit for the successes and responsibility for the failures. You must build upon your foundations to put us back on the path to equality. Integrate your organization into a national coalition under national leadership. The voices of our community and those like yourselves who represent us, together with those of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, children, friends and co-workers in every state, must once again be joined and heard loudly and clearly. We must unify with those whose goals we share and who support us in our schools, in our places of work and at every level of government. If temporary defeats are not eventually turned into lasting victory, and if we are unable to claim the rights to which we are entitled under the Constitution, we will face defeat over and over again.

JAMES HERNANDEZ
 Portland

BRO responds

TO THE EDITOR:
 Thank you for your letter and for giving me a chance to reply. I appreciate the passion behind your words, although I have to admit that the tone of your letter seems a bit harsh.

Where it seems we differ is in expectation. We are not naive about the complexities of the political process nor about the tough battles ahead, but we are not so cynical about our ability to influence the political process. Your letter seems to suggest that lobbying the Legislature is hopeless and unproductive. I just don't believe that is true. In fact, I think the Senate vote on July 8 is a clear indication that our effort, combined with that of thousands of Oregonians, has made an impact. And I believe we still can.

When we sent out an e-mail asking people to "Accept No Excuses," we wanted exactly what we said we wanted: for people to put pressure on the Senate to bring the bill to a vote, which it did by almost a 2-1 margin. As we move to the House, we are of course aware that this is a tougher political climate. Having lobbied the House all session, we don't share your view that there is little support for this bill in the House. In fact, we believe as a result of our direct conversations with legislators, we have the votes in the House to pass the bill if we can get it to the floor. There is one person standing between defeat and victory, and that is Speaker Karen Minnis. As a community, we cannot let her single-handedly stand in the way of our civil rights, and I believe we owe it to ourselves to push as hard as we can for the rights we deserve.

This is good news for all of us in Oregon, and I can't predict how it will all turn out. But we will not throw up our hands just because some say it is impossible or too hard. The minute we as a movement give into this kind of hopelessness, we concede defeat. That is something we just won't do.

I'm sorry you don't agree with our approach last year, but I hope you'll believe me that we would have had a ballot measure regardless of whether the marriages in Multnomah County had happened or not. Not only was the measure filed well before the marriages began, but 11 states had similar measures last year, and Oregon was the only one where any same-sex couples got married. When I tell people who work in other states that our opponents blame us for the ballot measure, they laugh, because they know that these measures were part of a national strategy to turn out evangelical voters. We should be wary of blaming ourselves and our organizations for not immediately succeeding in creating deep social change—that takes decades, and while we have made some amazing progress, I agree with you that we have a long way to go.

I think you raise some interesting points